

# Rolling Stone

**The Viral  
Murder  
of a Lost  
Teen**

**How Coldplay's  
Chris Martin  
Fixed Himself**

**PLUS**  
**HARRY STYLES**  
**H.E.R.**  
**TINA TURNER**

**50**  
**Best**  
**Albums**  
**& Songs**  
**of the**  
**Decade**

*THE RISE AND  
RESILIENCE OF*  
**ELIZABETH  
WARREN**

*THE ROLLING STONE  
INTERVIEW*



# THANKS TO OUR LONG STANDING

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MUSIC FESTIVAL  
SERRA PINTA, RJ

# FESTIVAL PARTNERS OF 2019



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RS

ISSUE 1335

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THAT FITS'

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Elizabeth Warren photographed in Boston on November 24th, 2019, by Peggy Sirota.

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# Online

What's new, and what you might have missed — from the latest original podcasts and videos to reviews of music, movies, and more



## Debbie Harry's Wild Life



The singer (along with Blondie co-founder Chris Stein) stopped by our Sirius XM studio to talk about her memoir, *Face It*, and her career as a pop trailblazer. Hear it on our *Rolling Stone Music Now* podcast.



### PODCAST

#### 'Useful Idiots': 2020 Is Here. Now What?

Join hosts Matt Taibbi and Katie Halper for ongoing coverage of the presidential race and exclusive interviews with key players. Along the way, they're examining important stories the media has gotten wrong — and laughing about whatever's left to laugh about.



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### LIST

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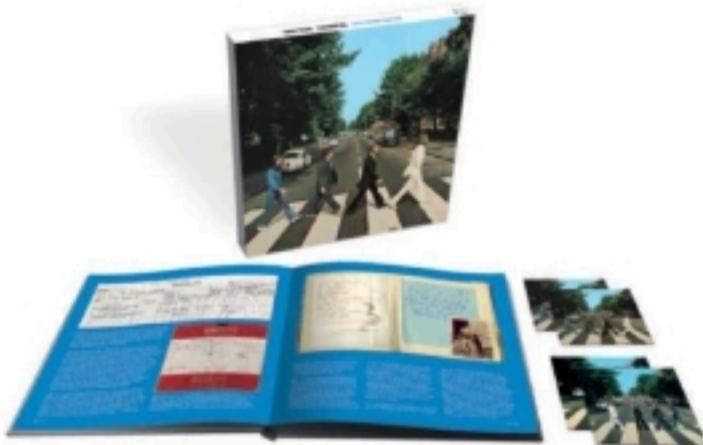
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OUT NOW

# Editor's Letter

## The 2010s: A Dark, Twisted Decade



WE STARTED DEBATING the decade's best albums and songs last summer, battling over how many Drake songs to include (he got three), which Black Keys record rocked hardest (we chose *Brothers*), and how high "Old Town Road" should be (it ended up at 12). The biggest argument was over which album to crown number one: Beyoncé's *Lemonade* or Kanye West's *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. In the end, Kanye's 2010 masterwork was undeniable. Throw it on today, and all the confounding things Kanye has done since then melt away. Like Brian Wilson's most daring creation, *Smile*, *Twisted Fantasy* is a singular artistic vision that hints at the unraveling darkness to come, yet sounds even more mind-blowing now than the day it came out.

Revisiting the music made us realize what a chaotic, transformative decade we're leaving behind. Streaming created a bounty of options for listeners and allowed musicians to be less beholden to record companies and radio. Even the biggest artists were free to chase their ambitions: Taylor Swift began the decade as a country star and ended it making pop that moved defiantly between genres; superstars Beyoncé, Rihanna, and Ariana Grande broke out of their roles as Top 40 queens to make grand personal statements on landmark albums. Kendrick Lamar won a Pulitzer Prize for the explosive, lyrically challenging *Damn.*, yet still reigned as a rap god who headlined halftime shows.

Music got more introspective (Drake's hugely influential *Take Care*), more political (Beyoncé's "Formation" and Chance the Rapper's *Coloring Book*), and more lyrically adventurous à la our favorite country song of the decade, Kacey Musgraves' feminist, queer-friendly "Follow Your Arrow." Global artists – from Latin hitmakers like J Balvin and Bad Bunny to a truth-telling teenage rebel from New Zealand named Lorde – moved from the margins to the pop charts. And beyond the pop charts, a new generation of female artists including Soccer Mommy, Snail Mail, Margo Price, and Lucy Dacus defined the sound of now.

"The 2010s was a decade where there was less consensus and artists pushed the boundaries of music," says reviews editor Jon Dolan, who compiled the Best Albums and Best Songs of the Decade features. "It was an amazing decade. The boundaries between genres melted faster than ever, the pop landscape became more global, and huge stars took artistic risks that would've been unthinkable 10 years ago."

JASON FINE  
EDITOR

"Patsy Cline stood alone. And [she] just had this voice that kind of – whatever you're doing, she could reach inside your chest, grab your heart and twist it a quarter-turn." —ELIZABETH WARREN



Yar at a Kurdish gravesite in Syria

### INSIDE THE STORY

#### The Betrayal of the Kurds

On the ground in Syria, witnessing catastrophe and the effects of Trump

WHEN JASON MOTLAGH AND CENGIZ YAR entered Syria on October 20th, after President Trump pulled troops from the region, they witnessed the human cost of the decision. "It was brutal to see such carnage wrought by the whims of one man," says Motlagh. Both Motlagh and Yar have built careers documenting hostile regions. Yet even for them, the trip came with grave risk. "We were downrange of Turkish guns," says Motlagh. "Extremist militias and ISIS sleeper cells were on the loose." Despite the chaos, Yar captured the turmoil of life on the ground with his photos. "The Kurds have endured incredible suffering," says Motlagh, "and they've always been gracious to me."

### RS REPORTS

#### Inside the Murder of a Teenage Girl



by an "incel orbiter" who posted the photo on Instagram — was largely incorrect. She had been in many ways a typical teenage girl: She'd dyed her hair, enjoyed concerts, spent hours on social media, and talked to other disaffected teens on the gamer app Discord. "This wasn't a story about Gen Z social media fame gone awry," says Dickson. "It's about a smart, talented, very sad girl who'd found some semblance of comfort in the online communities she'd built for herself, and the tragedy was that someone from one of these communities killed her."

# Correspondence

LOVE LETTERS & ADVICE



“I’ve come to expect Driver’s onscreen intensity, but it was fascinating to read this and learn that’s how he approaches all aspects of his life.”

—Lena Oliver, via Facebook

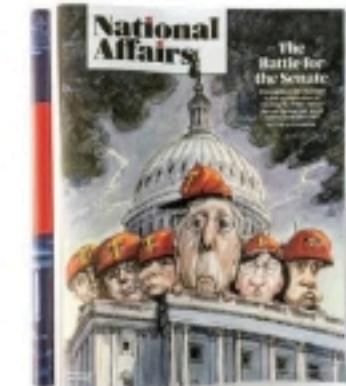
## War Stories

For our December issue [“Star Wars,” RS 1334], we marked the end of the Skywalker saga by sitting down with Adam Driver, J.J. Abrams, and Billy Dee Williams for a deep dive into the makings of the final film. Driver wrestled with how to live up to the epic’s legacy, and he wasn’t the only one reflecting once the tale ended: “Adam Driver is the best thing to come out of this new trilogy,” wrote Renee Lasswell. Readers were more skeptical of the film itself. “I can appreciate your articles,” wrote Scott Oliver, “but Disney forgot what made Star Wars great from its beginning in 1977. It was the story.” Abrams opened up about his creative decisions — like putting a female character at the center of the films — in his interview with senior writer Brian

Hiatt [“J.J. Abrams & the Secrets of Skywalker,” RS 1334]. Reader Anthony Sabella responded, “Asking blunt questions allows J.J. to set the record straight for those people that look for anything to complain about.” Meanwhile, Williams recalled trying LSD and the bigotry he faced in the early days of his career. “This piece [“Billy Dee’s Last Ride,” RS 1334] is dope, although given [his] storied career, it’s disappointing that he would only get this sort of feature because of Star Wars,” wrote Nik Carter, adding, “but Brian Hiatt is about as good as it gets.” Since the start, Star Wars has always generated heated debates, and reader Jim Alexander offered some advice to those still bickering: “Repeat after me: ‘It’s just a movie, it’s just a movie, it’s just a movie.’”



@hankstuever: The best writer on Star Wars is Brian Hiatt. It's quite possible I'll enjoy reading this more than watching the new movie.



## Fighting for the Senate

It can’t be either/or [“The Battle for the Senate,” RS 1334]. Democratic voters need to understand that if we don’t [regain the Senate], all of the plans that the candidates are proposing will not happen, even if we defeat Trump. We have to do both or they won’t be considered.

—Irene, via Twitter



## The Who Ain’t Over

Roger and Pete are like any old married couple [“Who By Fire,” RS 1334]. They can’t stand each other, but they stay together because of the children.

—Peter Principe, via Facebook

I’ve read countless interviews with Pete Townshend in your magazine over the past half-century. He’s always been cantankerous, always blunt. But in saying of the deceased Keith Moon and John Entwistle “Thank God they’re gone,” he reveals himself as cruel.

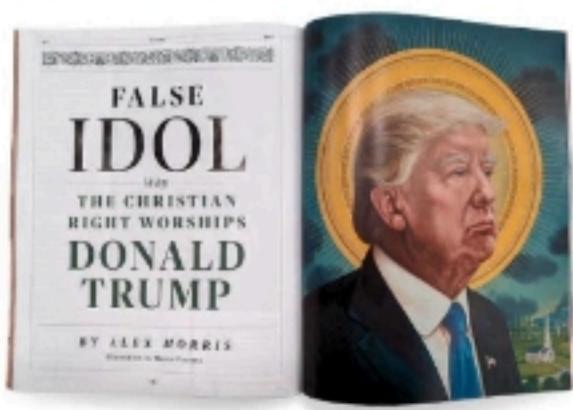
—David English, via the internet

Great read, but is there any iconic band that isn’t fueled by internal conflict?

—Jeff Gerosky, via Facebook

### SPOTLIGHT

#### Why the Christian Right Can’t Quit Donald Trump



Alex Morris’ story on evangelical support of President Trump [“False Idol,” RS 1334] struck a chord with readers. “I’ve watched my family follow their evangelical beliefs to a place of moral compromise,” Hank Tilbury emailed. “To break away from the beliefs of the people who raised you carries a lot of heartache — not so much because you fear argument, but because you feel responsible for hurting them.” Betty Armstrong tweeted that the article gave her “a better understanding of how my childhood Sunday-school teacher could support a president whose actions go against all that she taught us about being a good Christian.”

### CONTACT US

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# Opening Act

## Tina Turner Takes a Bow

"THIS MUSICAL IS my life," Tina Turner says. She's speaking literally. Turner is onstage at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre on Broadway, where *Tina*, the previously mentioned biographical stage production, has just officially opened. "It's like poison that turned to medicine," Turner says of the rough journey that inspired the show. Then she turns to the cast and smiles. "How long will you do this? Not as long as I did it, I hope."

It's early November, a few weeks before Turner will turn 80 years old. Adrienne Warren portrays the Queen of Rock & Roll through earlier, rockier years — from a timid childhood as Anna Mae Bullock in Nutbush, Tennessee, to being a new arrival in St. Louis, to her transcendent work and abusive relationship with Ike Turner. And, finally, to Turner's thunderous comeback in middle age, complete with iconic porcupine-spike wigs.

Warren is ecstatic and electrifying through early hits like "Proud Mary" and Turner's later-career "Private Dancer" pop reboot. The performer not only shows how Turner develops and changes as a singer — you can hear her mature vocally as the show progresses — she also radiates Turner's ferocious energy as she moves into stardom. "[Adrienne] transformed herself into the person she needed to be," Turner explains of the process of becoming, well, *her*. "With every note and every move of her hips, Adrienne is pure Tina. She has my admiration and my blessing. In fact, I like to say that I want to thank her parents, because now that she's onstage, I can truly retire." JERRY PORTWOOD





WHAT YOU GET IS  
WHAT YOU SEE  
Turner and Warren  
on Broadway



COLD  
LAGERED



COLD  
FILTERED

MADE TO  
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# newmix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

## Marcus King's True Blues

*He used to be an insecure outcast. Now the guitarist is introducing Southern rock to a new generation*



# Rock & Roll Exposure

→ ETHAN RUSSELL REMEMBERS getting a call from writer Jonathan Cott in 1968. "He said, 'Do you want to photograph my next interview?'" says Russell, who had at that point photographed only one band: Blue Cheer. Cott's interview happened to be with Mick Jagger for ROLLING STONE.

"I thought, 'This is it,'" Russell says. "I'm happy for the rest of my life." Russell would become one of the most prominent photographers in rock, capturing the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and the Who. His new book, *Ethan Russell Photographs*, is a collection of iconic images. "When

I was around them, I was very shy," he says of the bands he shot. "I very seldom told them what to do." Which worked out: "You get the most interesting pictures when the people are not engaged with having their picture taken. [Because] having your photograph taken – what the fuck is that?" ANGIE MAROCCIO

Ethan Russell  
Photographs  
KOLY PRESS  
\$50



## WILD HORSES ▲

For the cover of 1976's *Hasten Down the Wind*, Russell shot Linda Ronstadt after sunset at her Malibu home. "The horse," he says, "was a complete accident."

## SCHOOL DAYS ▶

Chuck Berry and Mick Jagger backstage, 1969. "Here we have [rock's] Generation One talking to Generation Two," Russell says. "It's a pretty historic moment."



## → MARCUS KING

**S**IX YEARS AGO, Marcus King felt lost. A long-haired, pot-smoking kid going to school in the small town of Piedmont, South Carolina, he struggled to fit in – he hated sports and missed enough classes to nearly be expelled for truancy. "I have nothing good to say about Piedmont, no good memories," says the guitarist. "They were trying to put me away, trying to put me into a juvenile detention center, trying to shave my head, put me in a jail. And I was like, 'I didn't do anything. I just missed a couple days of class.'"

But it all turned out OK. King started taking classes at a local music school to study jazz, leading him to where he is now: one of the most exciting guitarists to break through in years. With a gruff, soulful rumble of a voice, a deep love of Muscle Shoals, and a fluid, rapid-fire guitar style that recalls both Duane Allman and Mountain's Leslie West, King has been blowing minds at events like Eric Clapton's Crossroads Guitar Festival and headlining big rooms like New York's Beacon Theatre on his own. King is about to release an excellent album, *El Dorado*, produced and co-written with the Black Keys' Dan Auerbach, who had been wanting to work with him for a few years. "It's staggering how

## FAST FACTS

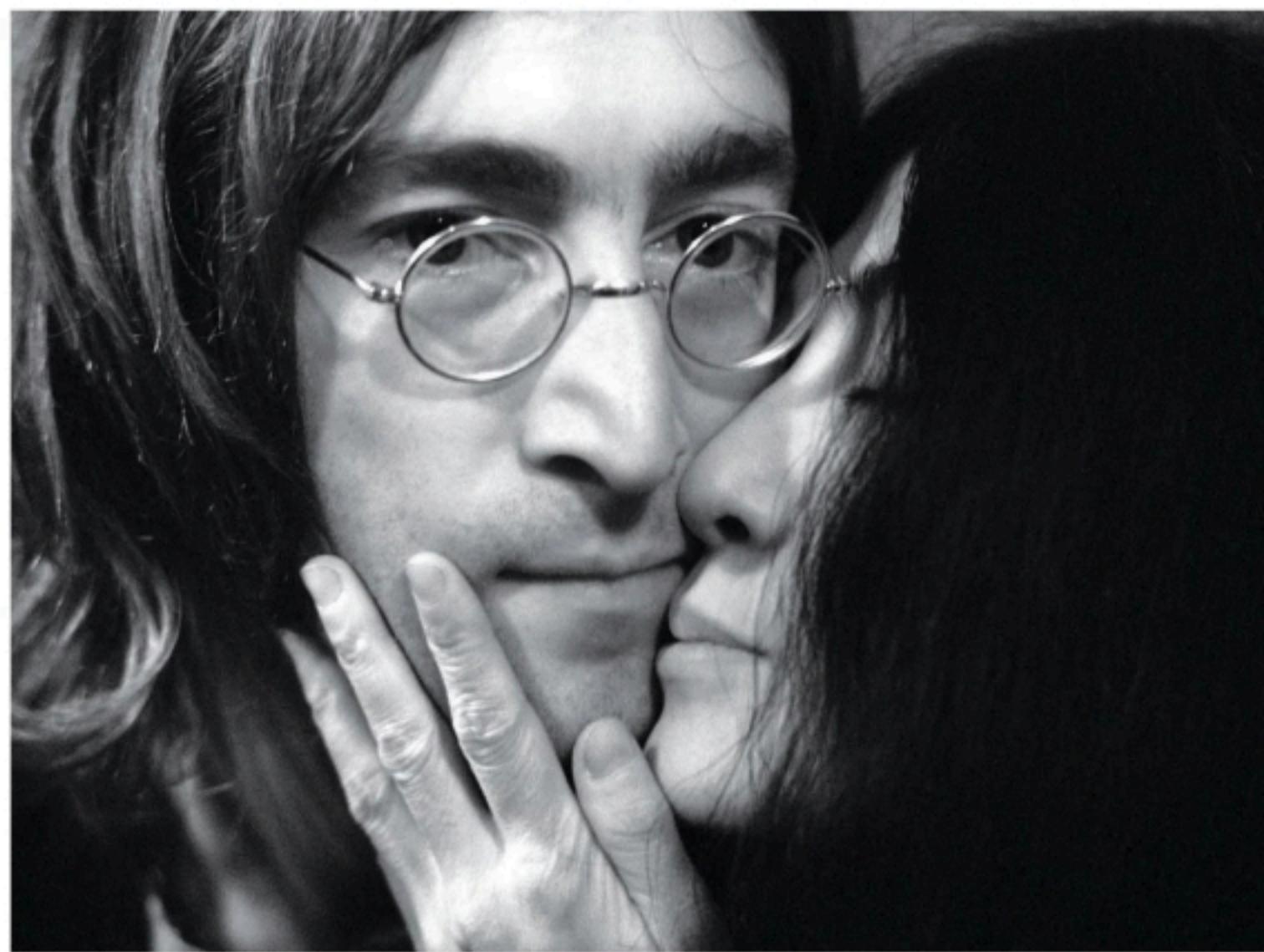
**TRUCKIN'** King's most surreal moment? Covering "In Memory of Elizabeth Reed" with Tedeschi Trucks Band on tour in 2018.

**CLEAN GREEN** King is trying to be healthy: "It's been a year of sobriety, with the exception of herbs," he says.

good he is, how crazy-good his vocals are, how he can go anywhere on guitar," says Auerbach.

King is a big, soft-spoken guy who talks with the battered wisdom of a veteran touring musician ("I love soul food, but you can't eat that shit every day"). He comes from a long line of music lifers in South Carolina; his grandfather was a country guitarist who played with Charley Pride, and his dad was a local blues hero. "His granddad had a Gibson, his dad had a Gibson, and now Marcus has a Gibson – it's all ingrained in his brain," says Auerbach.

King says that music "was medicine for my family." It turns out he means this literally: "My grandfather started having really bad ulcers, so



#### PLAY WITH FIRE ▲

Rolling Stones founder and guitarist Brian Jones at home in East Sussex, England, 1969, before he died in his swimming pool that July. Russell claims Jones spontaneously put on the flag shirt and grabbed the gun. "He was probably hungover," Russell says.



#### MILK AND HONEY ▲

John Lennon and Yoko Ono, 1968. "Photographing Mick Jagger was a huge fucking deal," says Russell. "John Lennon was that on steroids."

#### EMPTY PAGES ▼

Steve Winwood, 1968. "He wasn't very communicative," Russell says. "He's a stoner... in his own world a little bit."



#### GET OFF MY CLOUD ▲

Charlie Watts and Keith Richards on the Stones' touring plane in 1972. "We were transitioning at this point into the celebrity culture," Russell says. "They were at the top of the pyramid. Behind me as I'm taking this picture is Truman Capote."

#### ROCK & ROLL CIRCUS ▲

Taj Mahal and the Stones rehearsing for *The Rock and Roll Circus* at Londonderry Hotel in 1968. "It was family entertainment," Russell says of the concert film. "When he came to the door, Keith leapt to his feet, strode over, and gave him a hug. Something I'd never seen Keith do."

the doctor suggested he start playing again. He never stopped again until he died." Marcus was playing as early as three years old, and his instrument became an important tool as he dealt with his mental health. "I've struggled with it since I was a kid: depression, parts of bipolar disorders, obsessive-compulsive, chronic anxiety, all this stuff," he says. Playing especially helped him get through the death of one of his close friends in middle school. "I had no way to get it out," he says. "I needed to speak to somebody, even if it was [myself]."

King started the Marcus King Band at age 15. Within just a few years, Warren Haynes released the group's first album. When Auerbach

**"It's staggering how good he is," says Dan Auerbach. "How crazy-good his voice is, how he can go anywhere on the guitar."**

heard King, though, he thought his sound could translate even beyond the jam-band world. He invited King to Nashville, pushed him to record solo, and wrote songs with him on the acoustic guitar. "I think it was really nice for him to get into the studio and let his guard down, mix it up with some different musicians," says Auerbach. "We wrote as many songs as we possibly could and just let the cream rise to the top."

"I feel really proud of it," King says of the new album. He talks about other highlights from the past year, including rising to the occasion at the Crossroads Festival, where he met Bill Murray, Bonnie Raitt, and Clapton, who embraced King and told him how much

he loves his music. "It still doesn't feel real, at all," King says.

King is touring throughout 2020, including opening some dates for Chris Stapleton. As his career takes off, one of his goals is to raise awareness about mental health, especially in music. "I guarantee you Otis Redding did not go to a therapist," King says. "A lot of us tend to use music as our therapist. But sometimes it's good to talk to a professional."

Still, he acknowledges the strange healing effect of his guitar. "Music is kinda like your dog sometimes," King says. "You feel like it's the only thing that's never hurt you. The only thing you can really trust." **JONATHAN BERNSTEIN**

# Celine and Mariah Go On and On

With no heir(ess) apparents to the batshit-pop-diva throne, we need Celine Dion and Mariah Carey more than ever

HERE WAS A TIME when Celine Dion did not have to beg rappers not to tattoo her face on their bodies. But as the lady once sang, those days are gone. When Drake announced his plans to get the fellow Canadian icon's visage inked on his rib cage, joining his tats of Aaliyah, Rihanna, Sade, Denzel, and the Beatles, Celine pleaded, "Please, Drake, I love you very much.... We can sing together. I can talk to your mother. Whatever you want, but please." Oh, the price of being a legend. One day you're standing tall on the prow of the *Titanic*, ululating "My Heart Will Go On" over Celtic pipes; the next, you're giving tough love to the guy who wrote "God's Plan."

It's just another weird moment in Celine's dazzling resurgence, nearly four years after the tragic death of her husband of 22 years and manager of 35, René Angélil. Like Mariah Carey, Celine is an old-school pop diva riding high. Her new album, *Courage*, like Mariah's *Caution*, is a powerful comeback. Neither Mariah nor Celine has scored a proper hit song in years — the only time either has cracked the Top 40 in the past decade was Mariah's Miguel duet "#Beautiful" in 2013, from her superbly titled *Me. I Am Mariah... The Elusive Chanteuse*.

But neither of them really *needs* any new hit singles. The radio does a remarkable job of editing their canons so the quality songs remain, while the bad ones just disappear. So the longer they step back from the hitmaking hustle, the better they sound. The longer they wait between records, the more like stars they seem. They age well because they give us more emotional high notes, more back catalog, more will-to-power egomaniac overdrive than younger divas can possibly hope to match. Neither has ever for one minute resembled a sane, down-to-earth adult, and thank the pop gods for that.

Like fellow Quebec music legend Leonard Cohen, Celine is primed to thrive in her fifties because she never seemed young. Since she crossed over from Canadian child-star status to global pop prominence, Celine has had a delightful nutty-auntie energy. Who can forget her immortal rendition of AC/DC's "You



ROB SHEFFIELD  
SOUND AND VISION

Shook Me All Night Long" at the 2002 VH1 Divas Las Vegas concert, complete with pained air-guitar faces that John Mayer must have studied frame by frame? (When Celine sings the line, "He told me to come, but I was already there," she truly shoots to thrill.) But her new phase is her most endearing and moving yet: a middle-aged widow learning to loosen up and live again. She even cusses in the studio for the first time on *Courage*, declaring, "This shit is perfect!"

Mariah's ascent to a whole new level of celebrity mystique can be summed up in four magic words: "I," "don't," "know" — and I cannot stress this enough — "her." Not since Peter denied knowing his Lord and Savior on the evening of the Crucifixion has a denial resonated through history like Mariah's strategic amnesia on the subject of Jennifer Lopez. It was a classic power move, like her fantastic New Year's Eve TV

debacle a few years ago, when she refused to play along and lip-sync. That charm just shines brighter through the years, which is why at this point, the world is even finally catching up with the greatness of *Glitter*, her awesome 2001 cinematic fiasco.

Celine's *Courage* — which reached Number One on the RS 200 chart — is her version of Mariah's *The Emancipation of Mimi*, or Whitney's *My Love Is Your Love*: a midlife album from a diva with way too much grown-up shit on her mind and an anomalously personal statement that's out of whack with everything she's done before and whatever she'll do next. It's been six years since Celine's last English-language pop album, and in that time the world has changed in many weird ways. (Including the fact that lots of people now spell Celine's name with an accent over the "e," a comic frisson on par with Motörhead's umlaut. Why doesn't *every* letter in Celine's name have an accent?) But one of the weirdest changes might be that everybody worships these two now, after so many years when they were two of the most divisive figures in music. So now is the right time for them to luxuriate in the kind of grande-dame role

Whitney didn't live to see, reigning with all their quirks and tics intact. Fads come, fads go. Fashion changes. But for these two, the heart goes on and on. ®



## MUSIC PODCASTS

### Hit Man

This mix of music and murder focuses on Motown producer Lawrence Horn, who in 1993 hired a hit man to take out his family. The killer made use of a mysterious book, *Hit Man: A Technical Manual for Independent Contractors*, by the ominously named Rex Feral. What drove a man who recorded the Supremes and Smokey Robinson to risk it all? Can books kill? *Hit Man* has the answers.

### Final Sessions

Harry Nilsson's cult of fans — and his influence on other artists — have only grown since his death in 1994. Former RS editor Joe Levy tells the story of *Losst* and *Founnd*, an album of material recorded just before Nilsson's death, taking time out for fascinating asides — including Nilsson's boozy friendship with John Lennon.

### Heavy Metal Bebop

Metal and jazz may not seem to have much in common, but headbangers have drawn inspiration from horn blowers, and vice versa. On *Heavy Metal Bebop*, RS editor Hank Shteamer examines the connective tissue between the two, interviewing figures like Black Sabbath drummer Bill Ward, Living Colour's Vernon Reid, and jazz-fusion keyboard champ Jan Hammer.



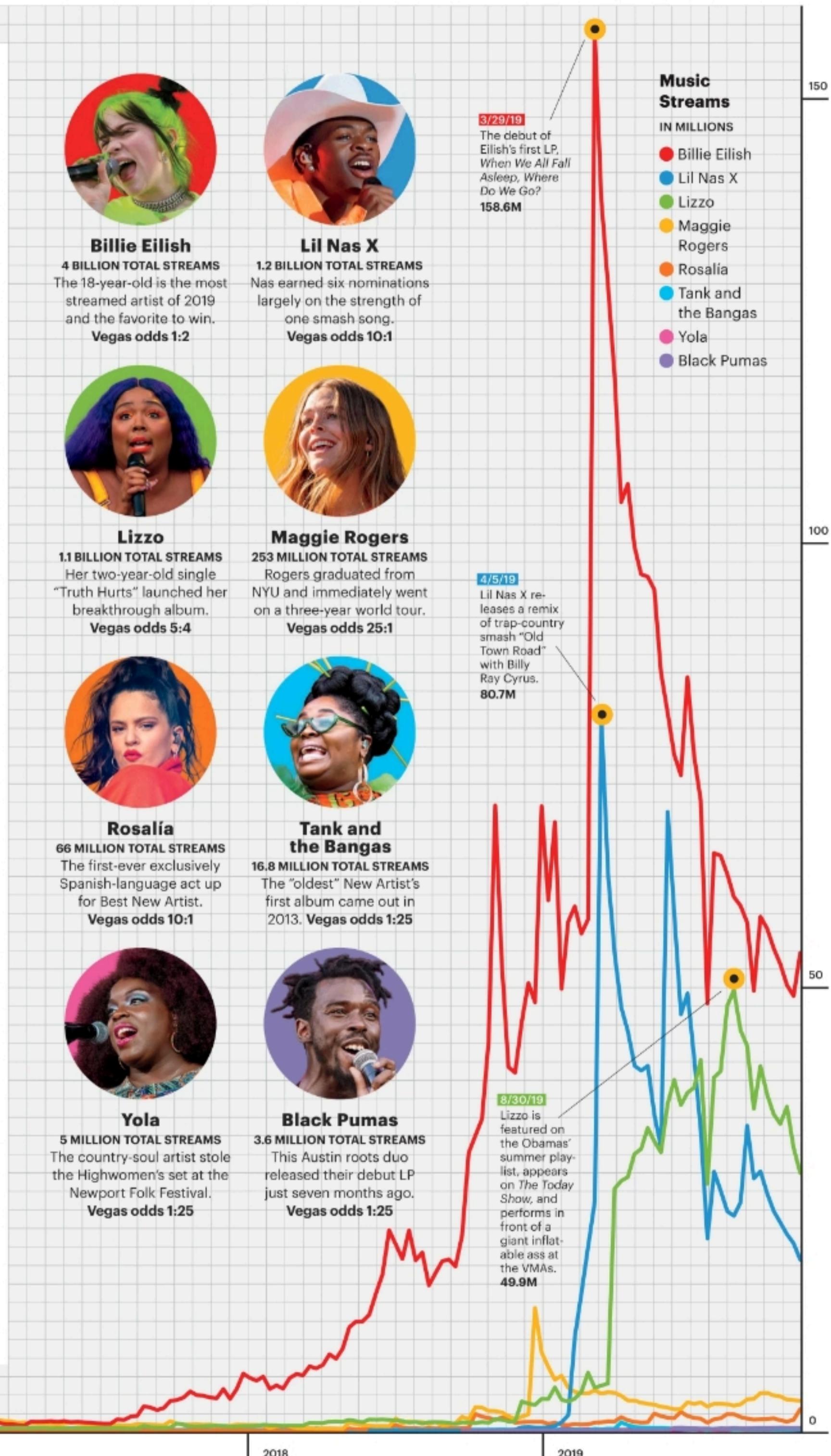
# WHAT'S A BEST NEW ARTIST, ANYWAY?

*This year, the Grammy Awards category is even more all-over-the-map than usual*

IT'S ALWAYS been tricky to understand what, exactly, it means to be nominated for Best New Artist at the Grammy Awards. The 2020 contenders make it less clear than ever. Nominees Billie Eilish, Lil Nas X, Lizzo, Maggie Rogers, Rosalia, Tank and the Bangas, Black Pumas, and Yola span the gamut in streams, sales, and audience size. Of the eight candidates, Lil Nas X has had the fastest rise. Funk duo Black Pumas are technically the newest artists, releasing their debut album in June 2019, while Lizzo has been putting out LPs since 2013. Eilish has roughly 1,000 times more streams and sales than Yola each week.

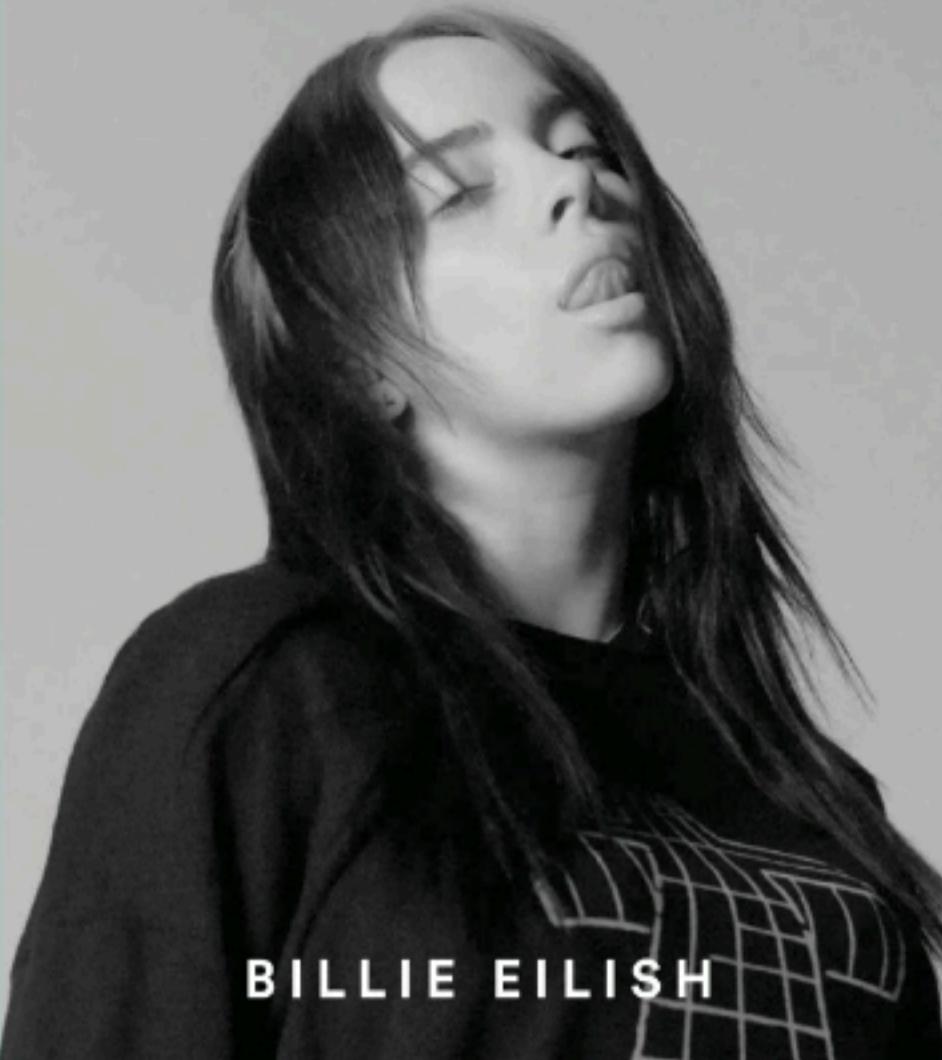
The Recording Academy, which selects nominees through an opaque, byzantine voting process, admits that Best New Artist "probably has the most complicated set of rules of any of our categories." It defines potential entrants as artists who release "the recording that first establishes the public identity of that artist or...group as a performer" during the eligibility year. Yet Lizzo's 2019 hit "Truth Hurts" first came out in 2017, and Rogers' "Alaska" went viral in 2016. It's an odd pretzel for the category to twist itself into, especially when Lizzo and Eilish are also nominated for the rest of the big-four awards: Album of the Year, Record of the Year, and Song of the Year, which typically go to more established acts. (Lil Nas X is nominated for all but Song of the Year.)

Of course, Eilish, Lizzo, and Nas were among the top-50 most streamed musicians of 2019; not one act from last year's crop of Best New Artist nominees was. Maybe the 2020 Grammys are just inducting a new class of superstars. **AMY X. WANG**





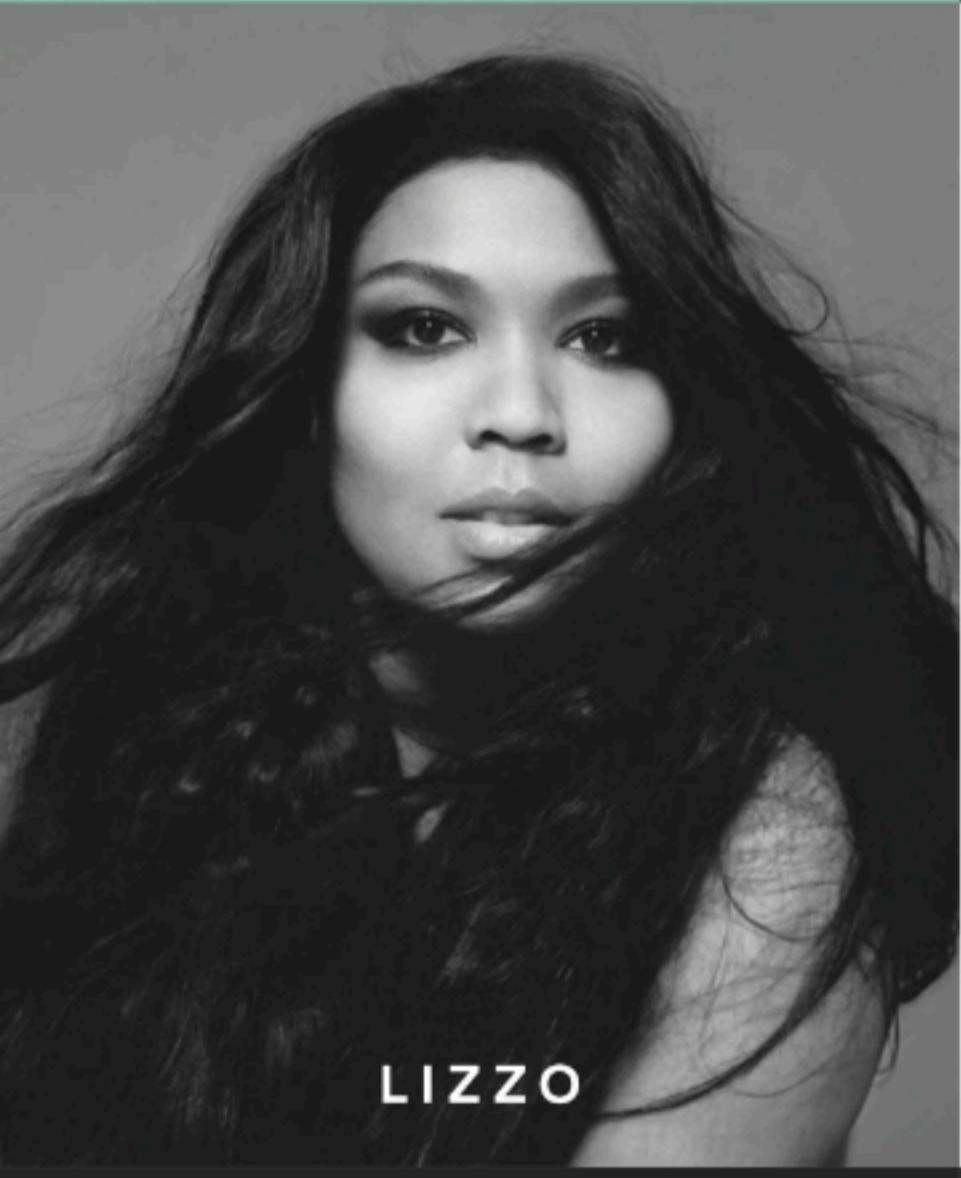
BLACK PUMAS



BILLIE EILISH



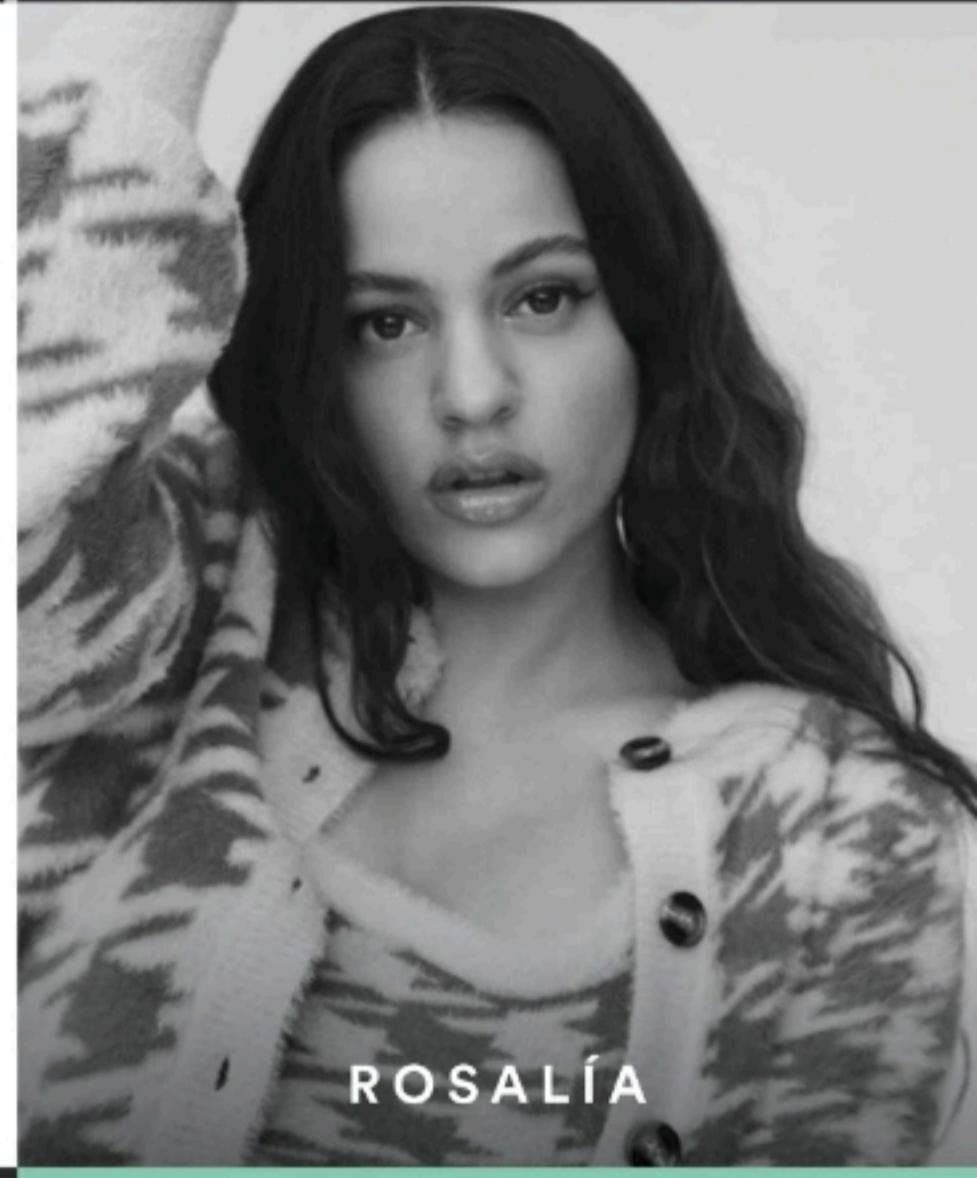
LIL NAS X



LIZZO

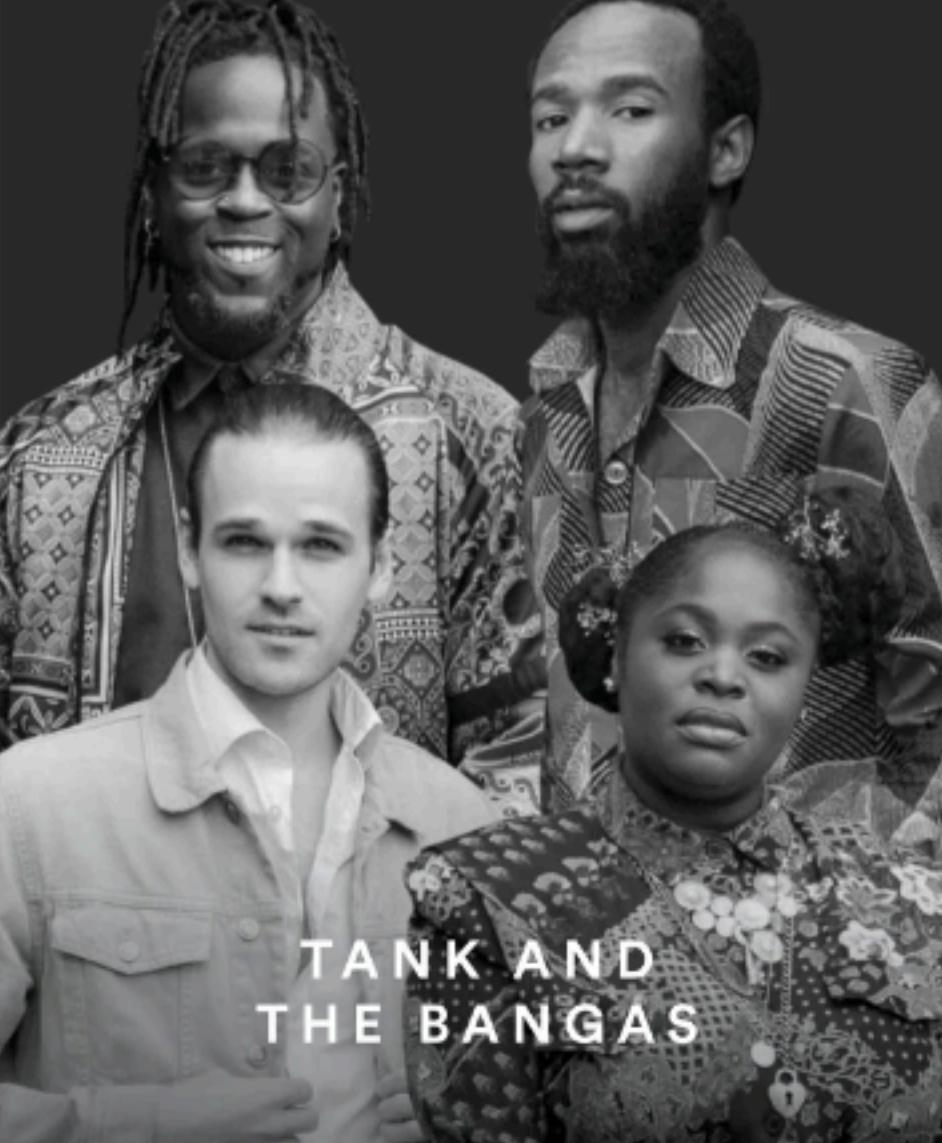


MAGGIE ROGERS

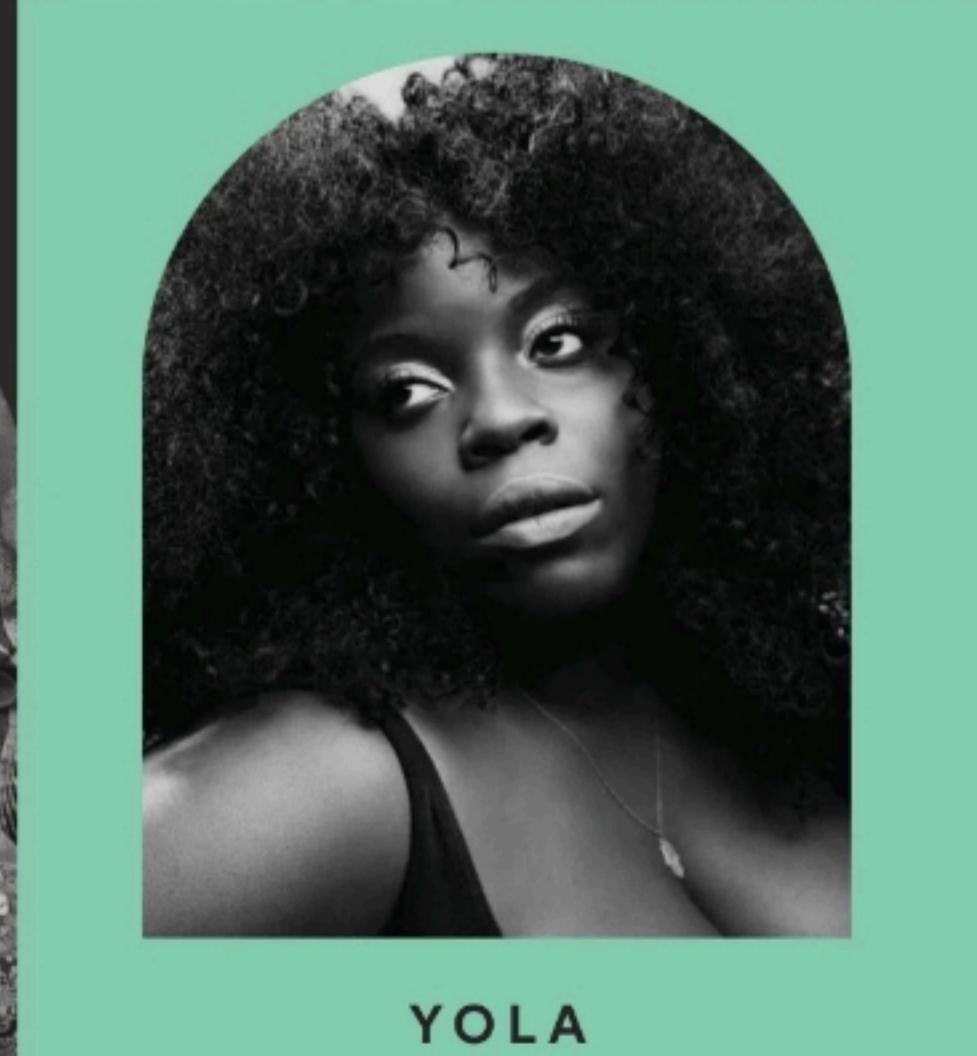


ROSALÍA

Best  
New  
Artist  
2020  
Congrats on your biggest year yet  
Spotify



TANK AND  
THE BANGAS



YOLA

# 100 Gecs' Strange Brew

*How two twenty-somethings who didn't even live in the same city made a breakthrough LP as chaotic as it is catchy*

**D**YLAN BRADY and Laura Les were living thousands of miles apart when they made the strangest, most intriguing album of 2019. The duo, who call themselves 100 Gecs, met in St. Louis, but by 2019, Les was in Chicago and Brady in L.A. The pair stayed in touch, and eventually found the perfect reunion opportunity for two internet-obsessed kids: a "virtual music festival" hosted inside the online game *Minecraft*.

100 Gecs crafted their "set" for the festival by trading files over email. Then they used the same process for their debut, *1000 gecs*, a 23-minute barrage of ringtone rap, pop punk, power ballads, trance, and ska – all held together by sticky-sweet hooks. Their lyrics are by turns funny, angry, and heartfelt, delivered by voices drenched in Auto-Tune in a way that enhances the emotion and delirium.

The album's chaotic sound makes sense for two twenty-somethings who developed their tastes in the age of file-sharing services, when seemingly every song ever was available and genre increasingly meant nothing. "'Hampster Dance,' [Eiffel 65's] 'Blue,' [Daft Punk's] 'One More Time' – only three songs I need," Brady deadpans.

If the Gecs' album sounds like the internet feels, their shows are more akin to punk rock, with fans moshing while Brady plucks a synth and Les rips a headless guitar. At the center of it all is something simple: "Good songs," Brady says.

"A good song is God," Les adds.

JON BLISTEIN

Brady (left) and Les in New York in November





# And the Winner Is...

 FOR YEARS, Drake has been the king of streaming. Post Malone, meanwhile, has been an increasingly formidable competitor, inching ever closer to Number One. In 2019, Posty finally made it. With 4.9 billion audio streams from January to December, the "Rockstar" rapper became the year's most-streamed artist by just 6.5 million plays. (See the full list on the following page.) But can he hold onto the crown? By EMILY BLAKE

## DRAKE COASTS TO NUMBER TWO

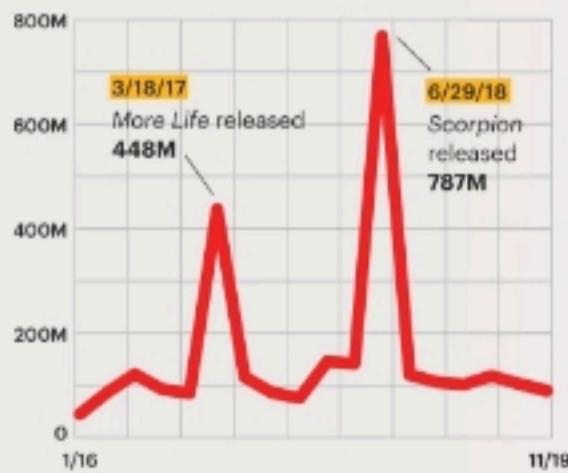
**LIFE'S BEEN GOOD** at the top for Drake. In 2019, he pulled in 4.89 billion audio streams without releasing an album, certifiably killing it without breaking a sweat. But it wasn't enough to hold off Post Malone.

Even if Drake releases an album in 2020, he may not regain the lead he had before. His base rate of streams has remained relatively stagnant since "God's Plan," which brought him to a new pace of 100 million per week. Despite its massive release, 2018's *Scorpion* — like 2017's *More Life* — failed to move the needle long term like 2016's *Views* did.

For Drake to get back the lead he's had for years, he'll need to come up with another "God's Plan" or *Views* to bring him up to speed.

### Drake's Streams Over Time

Drake's mostly been coasting at 100 million streams since early 2018.



### Drake's Top Songs of 2019

Without a new Drake album last year, songs on *Scorpion* did the heavy lifting.

Money in the Grave	293M
Nonstop	197M
God's Plan	168M
In My Feelings	162M
Nice for What	139M



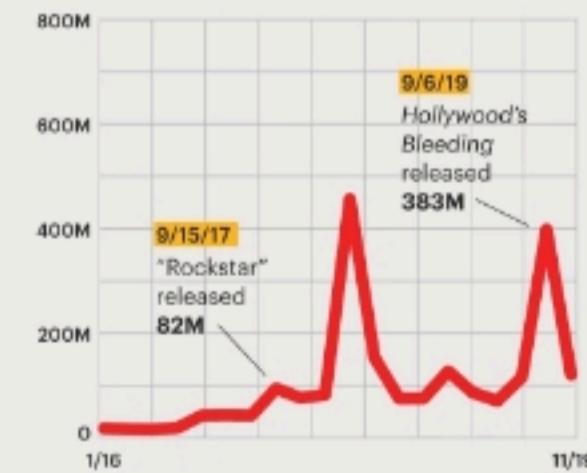
## POST MALONE: HAIL TO THE NEW KING

**FOR THE PAST THREE YEARS**, Post Malone's streams have been steadily trending upward. But it was 2019's *Hollywood's Bleeding* that finally took him to Number One. One reason: It was a very good album, earning a four-star *ROLLING STONE* review. This meant fans were more likely to listen to the whole album rather than just a few hits. It also helped that competition wasn't always fierce — i.e., no Drake album last year — allowing him to top the *Artists 500* week after week.

But the dust hasn't settled from *Hollywood's Bleeding*. Will it be like Drake's 2016 LP *Views*, launching him to new heights, or 2018's *Scorpion*, with his streams surging before bubbling back down? If Post keeps up the pace, there could be a tight race in 2020.

### Post's Streams Over Time

Post's streams have been trending upward since "Rockstar" in 2017.



### Post's Top Songs of 2019

*Hollywood's Bleeding* proved to be an arsenal of chart-topping hits for Post.

Wow.	580M
Better Now	270M
Goodbyes (feat. Young Thug)	267M
Circles	212M
Rockstar	199M



#### SPOTLIGHT

## YOUNGBOY'S QUIETLY HUGE 2019

FOUR OF THE TOP FIVE most-streamed artists of 2019 are household names. Then there is Youngboy Never Broke Again, a 20-year-old rapper-singer from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He doesn't even have a Top 25 hit on the hip-hop airwaves, much less pop radio, and the Grammys have ignored him. Yet he's a streaming sensation, with more than 3 billion on-demand audio streams in 2019 — 1.4 billion more than in 2018. For comparison's sake, Youngboy amassed nearly as many streams in 2019 as Lana Del Rey has in her career since 2014.

Youngboy's primary gift is his ability to deliver a hummable melody on top of chattering, bass-heavy hip-hop production. His outlook tends to remain melancholy even when the songs seem celebratory: In "Rich as Hell," he is "tossing, turning, unable to sleep."

**FAST FACT**  
While he had massive streaming numbers, Youngboy sold just more than 24,000 albums in 2019.

Youngboy served three months in prison over the summer for a probation violation, but he continued to earn streams by the millions. It helps that he's wildly prolific, releasing more than 15 mixtapes in the past five years. But his success on audio-streaming services like Spotify and Apple Music is surpassed on YouTube, where he's topped the U.S. Top Artists chart for nine weeks. "Some of the kids in the South use YouTube as the new cable," says Eli Piccarreta, the rapper's A&R man. Video streams accounted for around 30 percent of Youngboy's total on-demand streams in 2019; for stars like Drake and Post Malone, the number is around 17 percent. (The RS Artists 500 does not include video streams.)

According to Piccarreta, Youngboy Never Broke Again "probably has well over 10" more videos ready to go. "He is the number-one artist on YouTube," Piccarreta says. If Youngboy can learn to match that success on Apple and Spotify, "he'd be the number-one artist in the world." **ELIAS LEIGHT**

# The Biggest Artists of 2019 by Audio Streams

The year's Top 10 includes a leader that — gasp — isn't Drake, a soft-spoken up-and-comer, and the return of Taylor Swift

		STREAMS
1		<b>Post Malone</b> Republic
2		<b>Drake</b> Republic
3		<b>Ariana Grande</b> Republic
4		<b>Billie Eilish</b> Interscope
5		<b>Youngboy Never Broke Again</b> Atlantic
6		<b>Juice WRLD</b> Interscope
7		<b>Khalid</b> RCA
8		<b>Taylor Swift</b> Republic
9		<b>XXXTentacion</b> Empire
10		<b>Travis Scott</b> Epic

For more lists of 2019's biggest stars by the numbers and a breakdown of the year's most interesting trends, visit [RollingStone.com/t/2019yearinreview/](http://RollingStone.com/t/2019yearinreview/).

This list reflects U.S. on-demand audio streams from December 28th, 2018, to December 2nd, 2019, as recorded by Alpha Data.

Check out the full Rolling Stone Charts at [RollingStone.com/Charts](http://RollingStone.com/Charts)

#### Ariana Grande's 'Next' Level

Thank U, Next took Ariana Grande to a level that 2018's Sweetener couldn't: Number Three in the 2019 list of most-streamed artists of the year. (The previous year she ranked 18th.) Why? Thank U, Next didn't have just a couple of hits; it was full of them. In fact, the album accounts for three of Grande's top five songs of her entire career: the title track, "7 Rings," and "Break Up With Your Girlfriend, I'm Bored."

#### STREAMS



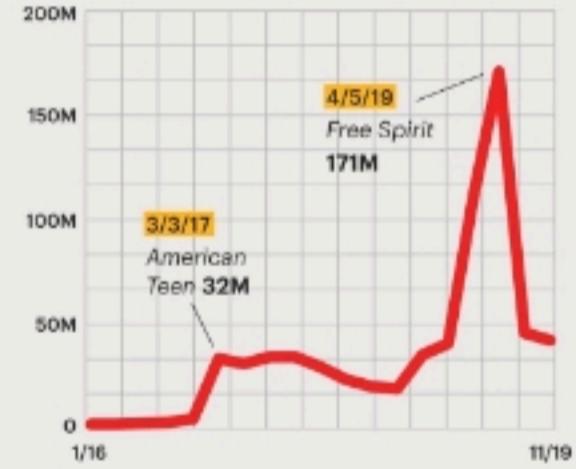
#### Bringing Up Billie

In her *ROLLING STONE* "Musicians on Musicians" interview with Billie Joe Armstrong, Billie Eilish said of her bleak, breathy brand of pop: "I really honestly did not think anyone would care." People cared — millions of them — and Eilish quickly emerged as 2019's biggest breakout artist. Her debut studio album, *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?*, was the third-most-streamed album of 2019, with more than 2 billion.

#### Khalid's Sophomore Jump

What's a one-hit wonder? A sophomore slump? Khalid has no idea. After his slinky iPhone-era love song "Location" put him on the map in 2017, the success of his debut album, *American Teen*, proved it was no fluke. In 2019, Khalid's second album, *Free Spirit*, racked up five times the streams of its predecessor, bringing the singer to 2.7 billion for the year — despite no huge hit singles.

#### STREAMS



#### Taylor Shakes It Off

Taylor Swift hasn't been one of the Top 10 most-streamed artists since 2015, when her buoyant, beloved *1989* was the second-biggest album of the year. After the relatively tepid response to its follow-up, *Reputation*, Swift seemed to bounce back with 2019's *Lover*. In addition to being the biggest album of the year in sales, *Lover* also saw more than 1 billion on-demand audio streams, helping to bring Swift back into the Top 10.

## TRIBUTE

# The Tragedy of Juice WRLD

*The Chicago rapper-singer turned teenage heartbreak into blockbuster melodies, becoming a leader of his hip-hop generation before his sudden death at 21 on December 8th*

By BRENDAN KLINKENBERG

**O**N A CHILLY NIGHT in Palm Springs, California, last spring, Juice WRLD drove a DeLorean across an abandoned airfield. He was set to perform at Coachella that weekend, and his record label, Interscope, had thrown him a party to celebrate the recent release of *Death Race for Love*, his second and best album, complete with fighter jets and the car from *Back to the Future*. Still new to fame and months away from turning 21, the rapper didn't talk much to the crowds of industry insiders, fans, and journalists. Instead, he mostly whispered into the ear of his girlfriend and posed for a seemingly unlimited amount of pictures, leaning against the silver car door sticking straight up into the sky. Sensing the shoot might never end, I left the party. It was the last time I would see Juice WRLD.

When he burst into public consciousness in 2017, the artist born Jarad Higgins cut through the noise of what's often termed SoundCloud rap with a daring synthesis: What if someone was able to take the best impulses of the loud, varied artists trending there and smoothed the edges into something you could play on the radio? With just two of his songs making waves on the then-vital streaming platform, including the chilly, mournful "Lucid Dreams," a bidding war broke out, and he walked away with a reported \$3 million contract that now looks like a smart bet. "Some rappers, it takes five or six years to get noticed," he told me. "Some of them don't get noticed at all. I was one that got noticed right away."

By the night of his death on December 8th – he collapsed at an airport in his hometown of Chicago, with few further details available at press time – Juice WRLD had emerged as the most prolific, popular, and musically accomplished of his peers in a scene that had all but faded. He differentiated himself by doing more than just taking others' templates and improving them. He was creating something new, and he was good at it. The plaintive, snagging melody of "Lucid Dreams" seemed endlessly reproducible for him. He could freestyle for more than an hour, a skill he was eager to show off. When it was time to finish an album, he would sleep in the studio for days. "It's like a hobby," he told me. "People look at me like I'm crazy for staying in the studio all day and night, but it's my safe haven."

Nearly every song in Juice WRLD's catalog comes with life-or-death stakes. He wrote about heartbreak and drugs to the exclusion of almost everything else. Imagine an arc that leaps from getting dumped in a high school hallway to getting high to numb the pain: Every Juice WRLD song lands on a slightly different point in that cycle. His fans hung on every word. (They still do: After his death, he became the most-streamed artist in America, with more than 38.2 million plays in 24 hours.)

That singular focus on subject was matched by an impressive unwillingness to be embarrassed. Juice WRLD created songs that made his fans feel cool, but they weren't cool songs by most accepted measures. His influences include some of the most maligned musical movements of the past three decades, from solo Sting to early-2000s emo. He was able to – improbably, and very successfully – marry those styles to modern hip-hop, then use that sound to rap convincingly about pain with the kind of gravity that lightens with age. Other rappers might steal your girl, but your girl broke Juice WRLD's heart just a few months ago, and he's still hurting. "I just know that's something that people are scared to talk about, and it's something that I'm not scared to talk about," he said. "I'm not self-conscious. I'll put it out there for people to relate to."

Drugs are another constant in his catalog, one that now sounds ominous. There's hardly a song that goes by without a mention of lean, Xanax, or Percocet. At times, he rapped about his dependence on substances with fascination; often, he alluded to the idea that he was headed for an early death. "Told her if I die I'm-a die young/Every day I've been gettin' fucked up," he rapped over a narcotized guitar loop on his 2018 debut album, *Goodbye & Good Riddance*. "Finally know the difference between love and drugs/Shawty tell me I should really sober up." The last time we spoke, in February 2019, he told me he was working on quitting drugs. "It's all about mind over matter," he said. "All about mind over matter."

I met Juice WRLD a handful of times throughout his brief career, beginning in the wake of his breakout SoundCloud tracks. In person, he was like a lot of kids I know: shy, soft-spoken, tolerating my presence. I would always get a better interview from him on the phone, where – freed from my attempts to make eye contact – he would talk about his favorite movies

(Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void*, *Space Jam*) and his pipe-dream ambitions (directing short films of his own). He was often excited about the smallest things: He went to a Brazilian restaurant in Los Angeles for the first time, then proceeded to go back every day until he was sick of it. He was asked to open for Nicki Minaj on a European tour, and mostly wanted to talk about the ferry that would carry the tour bus between dates. He loved video games.

Forward motion was important. "I just kind of go with the flow," he said. Otherwise, "You can get locked in your head, in a bad way. You can get overconfident." So Juice WRLD kept moving – always trying another genre on for size, always recording, always hopping into vintage sports cars when they appeared on a runway – and always at a full sprint, rarely concerned with onlookers. "The people that matter know what I am," he said. "What I really am is a hard worker, and a musician." ®



**I WON'T LET YOU FORGET ME**  
Juice WRLD in New York last April

LONG BEFORE she started calling herself H.E.R., Gabi Wilson was on an almost preordained path to stardom. She appeared on the *Today Show* as a 10-year-old prodigy, performing an eerily accomplished cover of Alicia Keys' "If I Ain't Got You," before signing a record deal at age 14. She grew up to be a multi-instrumentalist (lead-guitar chops very much included) alt-R&B auteur in the tradition of Keys and Prince, with exquisite control of her powerhouse voice. With five Grammy nominations for 2019 and a new album due early this year, H.E.R. is well on the way to fulfilling her considerable potential at age 22. "I've really put in the time and work," she says. "I'm so happy that everything has been, you know, manifesting."

**What was your journey like from child prodigy to the fully formed artist we heard on the first H.E.R. recordings, in 2016?**

It's one thing to be able to sing well, but another to be an artist and find your own voice within music. And that's what the goal was for me in my teenage years. I had to find myself. As a young woman, I experienced high school and heartbreak, and the music I started to write was a little bit more poetic, and more inspired by spoken word. The real raw emotional things that sit in the back of our minds, that you were afraid to say? That's how I started to write my music. And that's how *H.E.R. Volume One* came about.

**So you went to regular high school as you were pursuing a musical career? Was it basically like *Hannah Montana*?**

Exactly! Yeah, some people would be like, "When are you gonna be famous?" Or, "Weren't you on TV? Like, why do you go here?" And some adults would be like, "Your music's never gonna come out." I hated a routine life – I wanted to be on tour. I was in class thinking, "I can't wait to get in the studio." I really prayed for everything I



Q&A

## H.E.R.

*The rising alt-R&B star on the blues, defying industry stereotypes, and meeting a fan who got pregnant to her music*

By BRIAN HIATT

have now, but I'm thankful I was able to be a regular kid.

**You're a blues fan – what artists do you like?**

Albert King. B.B. King. I went to a Buddy Guy concert when I was, like, seven years old. B.B. King, with literally one note on the guitar, does something to everyone in the room – and that's what I've been inspired by as far as playing: feeling instead of technique. Even Donny Hathaway, how emotional his voice is, his tone is very bluesy, very

gospel-y. That type of music gives you a feeling you can't necessarily describe. Music is healing. It's something you can't explain, you just feel. And to me, blues does that.

**You have a real mix of modern and vintage influences. How did all that come together for you?**

When I was a little bitty kid, I was listening to the stuff my parents were listening to. My mom was a huge Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey, Mary J. Blige fan. My dad had a

cover band that I sang with, and he loved Parliament, Prince, Jimi Hendrix, and Eric Clapton, the blues, James Brown. As I got older, my uncle played a lot of Nineties R&B – Jodeci, Boyz II Men.

He'd pick me up from school, and he was playing Drake, the Weeknd, and Jhené Aiko. A few years later, Bryson Tiller came out, and all those influences went into *Volume One*. With my music, it's always me, because I am all these influences, but you never

necessarily know what sound you're going to get.

**How'd you get the idea for your transparent Stratocaster?**

My stylist and I were talking, because the outfit that I wanted was really sparkly and we didn't want to cover it up. And we thought, "Oh, instead of making a glitter guitar, why not make it transparent?" It looks so much cooler. And it matches whatever I'm wearing. Playing guitar is part of who I am, since I was a kid. I remember watching a video of Lenny Kravitz and Prince [from the Rave Un2 the Year 2000 concert] when I was a kid. That video changed my life – it made me want to play guitar just because of how rock star it is.

**On your new song "Anti," you sing about "scrutiny on a tiny screen," which whole generations can relate to.**

It wasn't a song for anybody else so much as it was for me. I sometimes have to remind myself not to feed into the pressure of what a female artist should be. People are saying, you know, "Why do you wear baggy clothes? You're pretty, you should show your face." I had to remind myself that I'm anti all those things.

**On your great single "Slide," YG raps about wanting a woman "in an apron/Booty all out cookin' bacon," which is amusingly contrary to the messages in the rest of your music.**

I mean, that wasn't my message. That was YG's message! I just put him on the song. I'm not complaining, because I would never say that on a record, but he definitely was just being himself. I asked for YG and I got YG! It's just a fun song – people hadn't heard a H.E.R. song like that, where I was just chillin'.

**Your sultrier songs appear on a lot of bedroom playlists. How do you feel about that?**

I did a meet-and-greet in France, and a woman came who was pregnant. And she said, "This is your responsibility" [laughs]. I'm like, "Oh, boy, I'm so sorry. But congratulations!" I think it's cool. Like, you know, I make music for every occasion! ☺



Flom, who hosts the *Wrongful Conviction* podcast, outside New York's Sing Sing prison in November

PROFILE

# A Record Man's Crusade

**For the past three decades, Jason Flom, the CEO of Lava Records, has been fighting to get the wrongfully convicted out of prison**

By ALEX MORRIS

**O**N A recent Sunday morning, music executive Jason Flom was cruising up the west side of Manhattan in his gray Bentley, going 57 in a 50, and enlivening the familiar drive to Sing Sing prison with the story of a letter he got some years back. "I opened it, and it said, 'Dear Jason, you don't know me, but you got me pregnant.'" He pauses, hands at 10 and two, blue eyes widening in a face that has been likened to a Marx brothers' mug. "Not a good opening statement, so to speak."

The letter came from the sister of a man named Steven Lennon, who had been serving 15 years to life for possession of 4.2 ounces of cocaine. "Which

was 0.2 over the cliff – that made it an A-1 felony, the same as murder," explains Flom, who happened upon Lennon's story in the *Daily News* in 1993. He was hailing a cab, on his way to play tennis. "Of course, the article caught my attention because it had prison and drugs," he says. "Once I started reading it, I was like, 'This is insane.' It was a nonviolent first offense. My whole notion of fairness was just thrown completely out of whack."

In fact, Flom realized that in another world – one in which he didn't grow up privileged and white in New York – Lennon's plight could easily have been his own. At age 26, he had gone not to prison but to rehab for cocaine. When he stumbled on Lennon's story, he was 32 – the same age as Lennon – he was clean, and he was "making my way up the noncorporate ladder, I guess you could say," at Atlantic Records, where he'd gone from working in the mailroom to signing bands like Skid Row and Stone Temple Pilots. Not coincidentally, Flom knew a few good lawyers. "There was this guy, Bob Kallina, we would call if one of the singers or

anybody in the band got arrested," he grins. Flom hit him up, then put him in touch with Lennon's mom, Shirley. A few months later, Kallina called to say that he had found a small loophole in the case. They got another hearing. Flom flew upstate and was waiting in the courtroom with Lennon's parents when the decision that he would be released was announced. "Once the judge banged the gavel down, and I saw what was possible, it was like, 'Holy shit, this is crazy,'" Flom says. "It was the most unbelievable feeling."

Six months later, he got the letter from Lennon's sister, who had been so stressed by her brother's incarceration that she hadn't been able to conceive. "At least that's what the doctor told her," he recalls. "She said, 'Right now, I'm pregnant. Thought you'd like to know.'" Flom, now 58, slows down as the navigation system announces, "Police reported ahead." He smiles. "Now I'm addicted to this."

ADDICTED MAY BE an understatement. Over the past 25 years, Flom has become so involved in criminal-justice

reform that he's lost count of exactly how many people he's helped get out of prison. Improbably, his work in that field has almost overshadowed one of the most insane A&R careers in modern musical history – a career he kick-started by cold-calling radio stations around the country, asking which band they were getting the most requests for (incidentally, a band called Zebra), and then sticking that tape under the nose of higher-ups. "The president of Atlantic was listening to the cassette on his drive home to Long Island, decides he doesn't like it, pops it out of the tape deck, and it's playing on the fucking radio," Flom says with a laugh.

Two years after helping to secure Lennon's release, he founded the Atlantic label Lava Records ("Why 'Lava'? Because it's hot, right?") before going on to become chairman and CEO of Atlantic in 2004; chairman and CEO of Virgin Records in 2005; chairman and CEO of Capital Music Group in 2007; and then, in 2008, founder and CEO of a relaunched Lava Records under the Republic/Universal Music Group umbrella. ("Republic is typically

the number-one label in the business," Flom says with a shrug. "I figured I'd rather work with them than compete with them.") In addition to Stone Temple Pilots and Skid Row, he has discovered and developed artists like Kid Rock, Matchbox 20, Jewel, Tori Amos, the Corrs, the Trans-Siberian Orchestra, and Sugar Ray.

And Flom has a knack for breaking acts that others have left for dead. "When I met Katy Perry, she was about to be dropped by her second label," he says one afternoon when I visit his office, which is packed with pictures of him posing with celebrities, dignitaries, and ex-cons. "Kid Rock, same thing. He'd had three albums, and they all flopped. Hayley Williams? Nobody knew who she was. Lorde, when I first heard her, she had 200 SoundCloud plays. But sometimes you just feel it – like, I get all tingly when I hear something special. And other times, marketing has been one of the secrets to my success because I'm too stubborn to admit I was wrong."

It's that same stubbornness that's paid off when it comes to taking on the criminal-justice system. Soon after helping free Lennon, Flom read a story in *ROLLING STONE* about DEA sting operations at Grateful Dead shows. "They were posing as Deadheads in order to basically entrap these hippie kids, and I was like, 'OK, this is really not what our tax dollars are meant to be doing.'"

The article referenced a group called Families Against Mandatory Minimums, so Flom called it up and joined the board. Then he saw something on TV about the Innocence Project, so he joined its board as well, becoming its first member (he's now also on the boards of the Legal Action Center, Proclaim Justice, Drug Policy Alliance, Injustice Watch, and VetPaw). "I don't even remember if I called first," he tells me. "I might have just shown up. Back then it was such a tiny operation: two guys in a room with a brief case, a phone, and a dream. And maybe a microscope. I said to them, 'I'll do anything you want me to do.'"

What he's turned out to be particularly good at doing is getting governors and presidents to grant clemencies, using his connections, his doggedness, and his significant powers of persuasion to simply bypass a broken system and go straight to the top. "It can really help sometimes," says Jeff Kempler, the COO of Lava and a committed member of what he calls the "Flom-iverse."

"Like taking a governor or a senator backstage to a Greta Van Fleet show is useful for, 'Hey, let me also, while you're here, talk to you about this legislation around bail reform.'"

His most stunning achievement in that realm was finagling an invitation to a dinner with Bill Clinton in 2000. Flom secretly moved place cards around so that he'd be close enough to the president to have a discussion with him: "You know, you got to do what you got to do." Once seated, he gave Clinton a letter from one of the five people he had granted clemency to a few weeks prior. "I said, 'So, Mr. President, what you did for these five people is wonderful,' maybe I even said 'heroic' – whatever, I was caught up in the moment. I had never met the leader of the free world before! I said, 'But I know of hundreds of other cases just as bad as those.' And he says, 'You get them to me and I'll sign them.'"

Clinton – whose own brother had spent a year in jail for a drug charge before the era of mandatory minimums – set certain parameters: He would only consider nonviolent first offenders who were already fairly far into long sentences. Flom started digging up cases and eventually presented Clinton with 25 clemency requests. The president granted 17 of them. "I remember adding it up, and between those 17 people, they had several hundred years left," says Flom. He's also sponsored four attorneys to work processing clemency applications for the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, meaning that he had a hand in at least some of the 1,715 clemencies Obama granted by the end

of his second term. "And there are a bunch [of prisoners] who I've been able to convince various governors to send home, probably 10 or 12," he says, trying to count them off by name. "I think there's five that I've been able to convince others not to execute."

That number may soon go up to six. In 2016, Flom launched a podcast called *Wrongful Conviction With Jason Flom*, in which he interviews men and women who have been convicted of crimes they seem very credibly to not have committed. (The show is now in its ninth season, has 11 million downloads, and has reached number seven on Apple's podcasts chart.) Most of the

"The Rodney Reed case had this amazing almost-explosion, like a hit," says Kempler. "It's like getting a hit record. People get exposed to it, it awakens something in them, and they turn that into action. [Flom's] very good at getting people to go do something."

In that sense, the same skill set that made him an A&R phenomenon is what makes him an effective advocate. "I love talking," Flom says of the podcast. "I'm very good at talking, bad at shutting up. So it seemed like a natural thing." His number-one objective, he says, is to create better jurors – people who know that a confession may have been made under duress or even violence, who don't trust the junk science of shoe-print or bite-mark analysis, and who won't be swayed by confirmation bias. His goal, in other words, is to head off wrongful convictions at the pass.

IT'S THE WEEKEND before Thanksgiving at Sing Sing, and the visitor intake area is flooded with families bundled in coats, soggy from the driving rain outside. Babies cry. Bags of candy and dry goods clutter the ground. A sign warns that children should not be placed on the counter. Flom – who has, naturally, become friends with the warden – is guided into a primo parking spot near the entrance, hustled to the front of the line, VIP-style ("I always feel bad about that"), but still made to tread through the paperwork and the metal detector like everyone else.

For many exonerees and current prisoners, Flom – the son of the Flom who lent his name to the famous law firm Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher, and Flom – is something more than family; he's a lifeline to a normal existence. When someone he knows gets out of prison, he'll often set up job interviews, vouch for their character, and figure out what they need – materially or otherwise – to help them adjust to life on the outside. "I have seen that for quite a number of exonerees, a little bit of support can go a very long way," he says, "because they are so motivated to become successful," to make up for lost time.

Flom also, crucially, takes their calls, listens to them, doesn't treat them like a walking tragedy or a person with something to hide. At a dinner party for a number of exonerees a friend of his hosted a few days before our trip to Sing Sing, he'd given off the vibe of a cool cousin rather than a patron saint or paterfamilias.

[Cont. on 93]



## "The Rodney Reed case had this amazing almost-explosion. It's like a hit record. It awakens something in people, and they go and turn that into action."

people who go on the podcast are already exonerees, or have taken Alford pleas (which prosecutors offer, it appears, when the judicial system knows it fucked up but doesn't want to officially admit to it).

Occasionally, though, he interviews someone who is still in prison, as he did with Rodney Reed, a Texas man – and Innocence Project client – who has been on death row for more than 22 years for the abduction, rape, and murder of a cop's fiancee, and was scheduled to be executed by lethal injection on November 20th. On November 13th, Flom hosted him on the podcast, detailing how the evidence used to convict him actually demonstrates his innocence, and helping to foment a media outcry that included Kim Kardashian, Rihanna, Dr. Phil, Beyoncé, and Ted Cruz, and that led close to 3 million people to sign a petition for Reed's release. On the 15th, the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles voted unanimously to stay his execution.



## Beerbongs and Billie

Billie Eilish ran into her pal Post Malone at the American Music Awards in Los Angeles, where Eilish took home honors for New Artist of the Year and Favorite Artist – Alternative, and Post Malone's latest LP, *Hollywood's Bleeding*, was named Best Hip-Hop Album. "I've grown up watching you all," Eilish told her fellow nominees.



### ▲ BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY'S

Tiffany Haddish threw herself a combination bat mitzvah and 40th-birthday bash in Beverly Hills to celebrate the release of her new Netflix special, *Black Mitzvah*. "I've been studying Hebrew," she told Jimmy Fallon recently. "I'm reading the Torah. I've got to represent my ancestors."



**LIFE'S BEEN GOOD**  
Joe Walsh jammed with the Black Keys at the Forum in L.A., covering gospel rocker Glenn Schwartz. "We got to live an Ohio rock & roll fantasy," says Dan Auerbach (right).



**MONEY MAKER**  
Chris Robinson saluted fans at the Black Crowes' reunion gig in New York. "See you next summer!" he said.



### ► ROCKY ROAD

Rihanna walked the red carpet with A\$AP Rocky at London's Fashion Awards, where Rihanna's Fenty label took home an honor. "My DNA has to run all the way through it," she said recently. "I don't want anyone to think, 'Rihanna would never wear that.' She recently called the past year "an overwhelming one, and I'm working on...balance."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: KEVIN MAZUR/AMA2018/GETTY IMAGES; EMMA MCINTYRE/GETTY IMAGES; WES ORSHOSKI/GARRETT CATER/MOLE/BFC/GETTY IMAGES; CATIE LAFON



**MEGAN'S LITTLE STALLION**  
Megan Thee Stallion hung with her French bulldog 4oe (pronounced "four") backstage at Travis Scott's Astroworld in Houston. Megan's dog even has his own Instagram page, with 200,000 followers.



**▲ MAMA, DON'T LET YOUR BABIES GROW UP TO BE COWBOYS**  
Willie Nelson had a visitor at his Sirius XM show: Margo Price and her six-month-old daughter, Ramona. "[It's] like being baptized," Price said. Nelson recently made headlines when he announced he had stopped smoking pot, but those reports turned out to be false. "I'm not smoking any more, but I'm not smoking any less, either," he said.



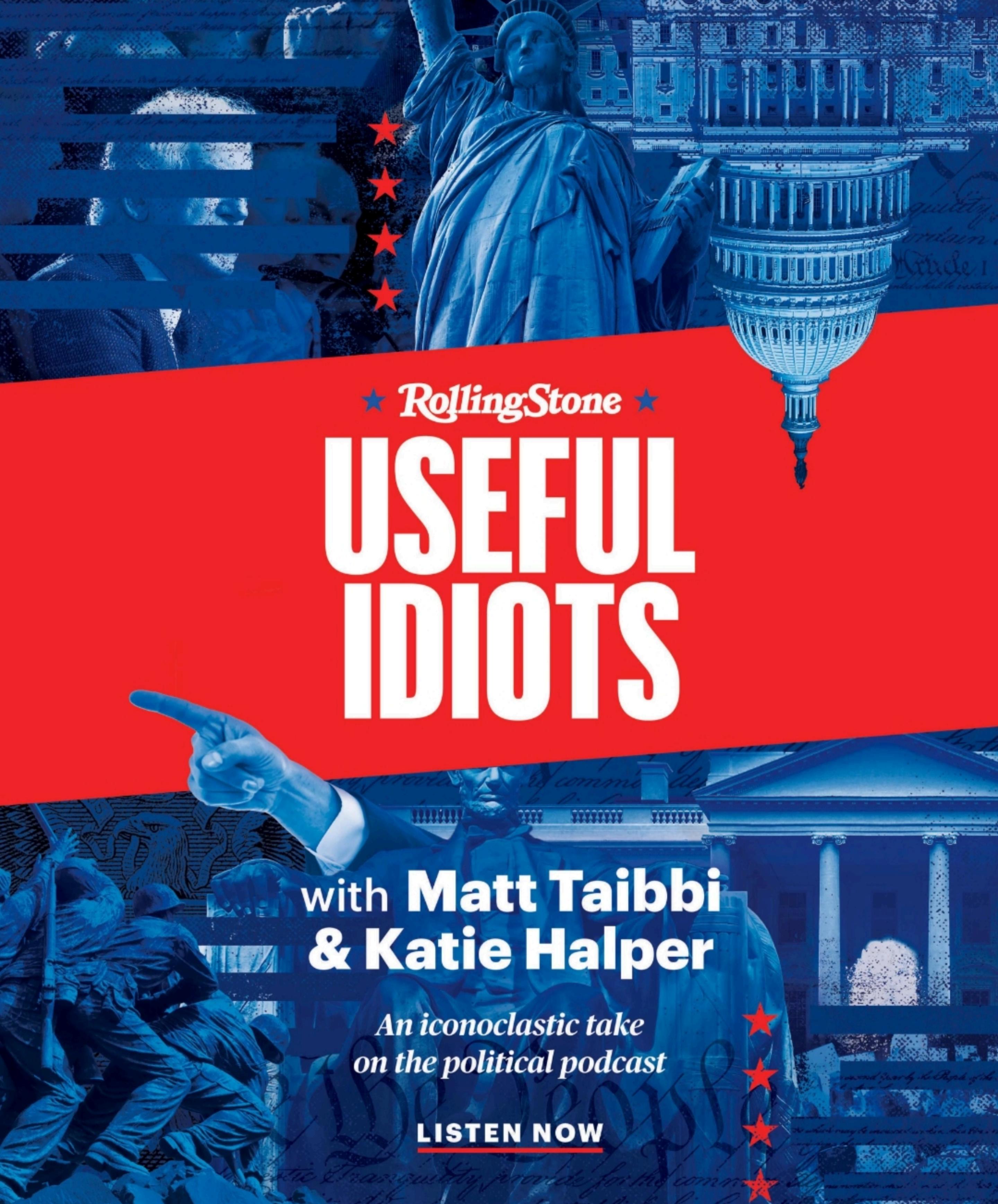
**MIGOS BALL OUT**  
Quavo of Migos relaxed in the VIP tent at Travis Scott's Astroworld, where he and Offset joined Scott onstage for a set that also featured a Kanye West cameo.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CHAD WADSWORTH; MARGO PRICE; INSTAGRAM: CHAD WADSWORTH; MICHAEL WEINTRAUB; MEGA



**◀ SUCH A NIGHT**  
Forty-three years after the Band's farewell show, the Last Waltz, Robbie Robertson made a rare appearance at a Nashville tribute to the legendary event. He shared the stage with Emmylou Harris and Margo Price on "The Weight." "In 1976, I had a crazy idea," he said of the show. "It wasn't so crazy after all."



★ *Rolling Stone* ★

# USEFUL IDIOTS

with **Matt Taibbi  
& Katie Halper**

*An iconoclastic take  
on the political podcast*

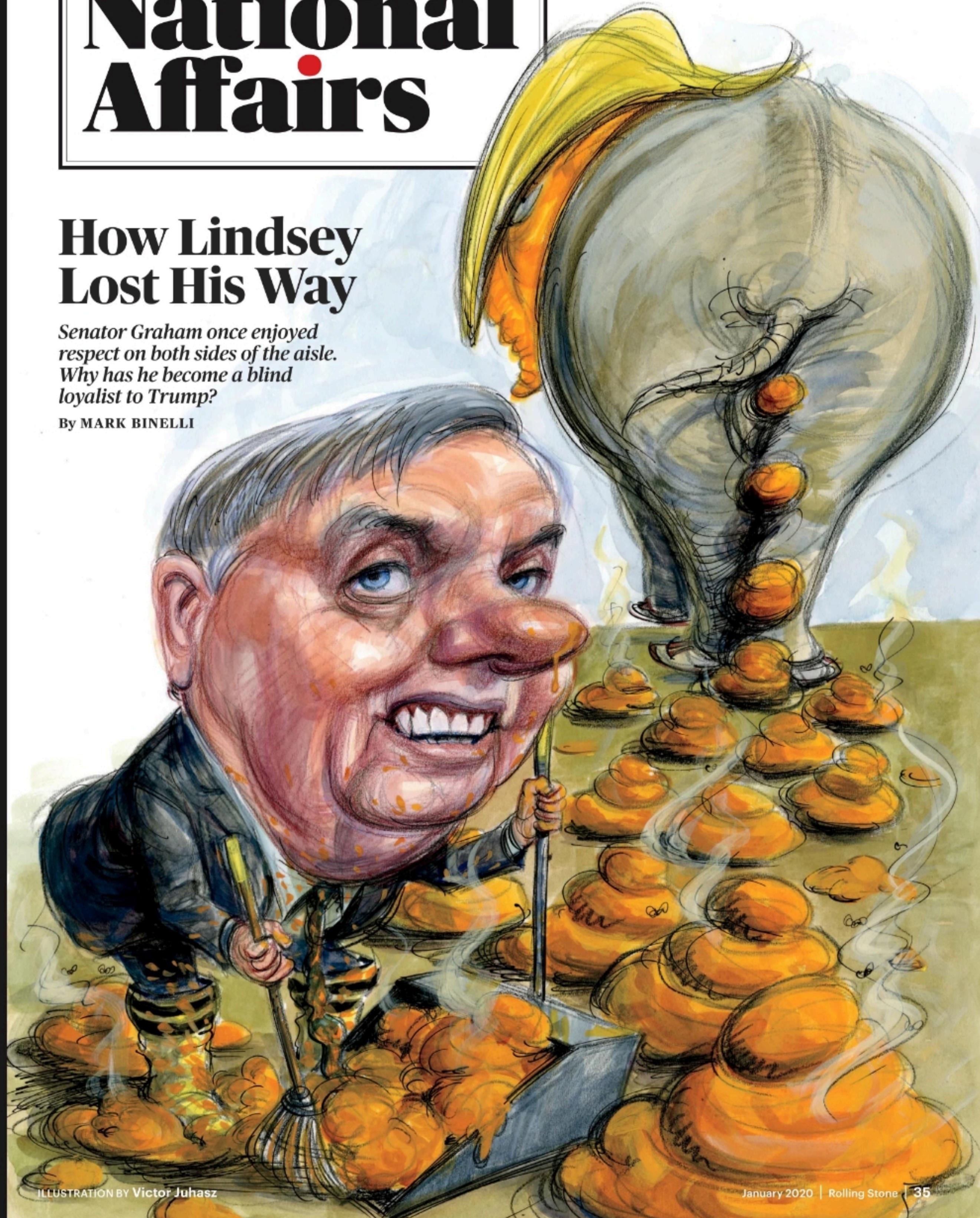
**LISTEN NOW**

# National Affairs

## How Lindsey Lost His Way

*Senator Graham once enjoyed respect on both sides of the aisle. Why has he become a blind loyalist to Trump?*

By MARK BINELLI



**L**INDSEY GRAHAM and Donald Trump were born nine years and one month apart. Trump came first, but when they appear side by side, as they often do these days, the men look about the same age. On November 6th, in the East Room of the White House, the president held an event to mark the record number of federal judges his administration has appointed, and Graham was there, having played a critical role in the achievement as chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Trump's staff had scheduled the event in part to shift focus from the House impeachment investigation, to remind any wobbly Republicans of the reason they'd held their noses and voted for the guy in the first place.

Over the course of his three terms representing South Carolina in the Senate, Graham had become predominantly known for two things: extreme hawkishness on foreign policy, following the lead of his close friend and mentor, the late Arizona Sen. John McCain, and a bipartisan streak that resulted in high-profile attempts to cut big deals on issues like immigration reform and climate change. A former senior staffer for a Democratic senator who has worked alongside Graham on bipartisan legislation tells me, "Like John McCain, he was a conservative Republican, but it was always worth asking where he was going to be on a particular issue, because he wasn't completely beholden to party orthodoxy. He'd often be way out ahead of his staff, negotiating on the Senate floor unbeknownst to them, and they would be playing catch-up."

Will Folks, a conservative political blogger in South Carolina, says, "The joke here is Graham has a 'count to six' approach to governing: He spends the first four years of his term doing whatever he wants, veering off toward the left, and then the last two years, when the electorate is paying more attention, he comes right."

Graham is "never flustered, and just a natural at dealing with people who don't like him,"

says David Woodard, a political-science professor at Clemson University who ran Graham's first two campaigns for the House of Representatives and recalls the first-term congressman as quickly becoming the unofficial social director for his freshman class, though he added, "You're going to find Lindsey knows a lot of people, but he's not close to anybody."

Like much of the GOP establishment, Graham had opposed Trump during the 2015 primary, but he spoke out more forcefully than most, and in the general election, he wrote in third-party candidate Evan McMullin. Which has made his subsequent capitulation all the more breathtaking, even in the context of a modern Republican Party completely transformed into the party of Trump. In the past few months alone, in advance of a likely Senate impeachment trial, Graham has doubled down on the president's inflammatory characterization of the House inquiry, calling it a "lynching in every sense"; preemptively announced he wouldn't be reading any of the transcripts of deposed House witnesses, though he'll be a juror in the trial, telling reporters he'd "written the whole process off...this is a bunch of B.S.;" and most recently, requested documents for a Judiciary Committee investigation into the entirely baseless claims that Trump's leading 2020 rival, Joe Biden, pressured the government of Ukraine to fire its lead prosecutor in an effort to help his son Hunter.

Shortly after Graham's office requested documents pertaining to the Biden investigation, a 2016 video surfaced in which Graham paid heartfelt tribute to the former vice president, calling him "as good a man as God ever created" and saying, "If you can't admire Joe Biden as a person...you need to do some self-evaluation." It felt like a taped confession to a future crime, as if the old Graham, the Graham who knew better, had put his soul in a time capsule in order to shame his craven Trump-era self. Here was video evidence of Graham's willingness to protect a man he knows to be corrupt

by falsely accusing a friend of corruption. By that point, though, Graham's debasement had been so thoroughly realized, the hypocrisy on display barely made an impact.

Graham had first come to national prominence 20 years earlier, during the Senate impeachment trial of Bill Clinton. Graham had still been a member of the House of Representatives then, elected during the so-called Republican Revolution of 1994, the Newt Gingrich-led conservative backlash to Clinton. Graham, a former trial lawyer, became one of the House managers during Clinton's Senate trial – essentially, a prosecutor tasked with making the case to the Senators as to why the president should be removed from office. A boyish 43-year-old in an ill-fitting suit, he deployed his mellifluous Southern accent as cannily as the man whose election he was trying to undo. "What's a high crime?" he asked the chamber. "How about if an important person hurts somebody of low means? It's not very scholarly, but I think it's the truth.... It *dudn't* even have to be a crime!" Deploying that "dudn't," especially, was pure Clinton, and watching the old clip now, Graham looks like he's auditioning for a regional theater production of *Matlock*.

At the East Room event, Trump summoned Graham to the podium. The years had accentuated Graham's jowls and moistened his pale-blue eyes. Al Franken used to describe Graham as the second-funniest member of the Senate, and in his brief remarks, Graham leavened the embarrassing obsequiousness Trump demands of his subordinates. Referring to his own disastrous 2016 presidential run, Graham began, "After I got beat like a dog – which he likes hearing – he called me over to the White House and said, 'I'd like you to help me.'

"I said, 'I'd love to help you be a great president, because you're now my president.'

"He said, 'I don't have your phone number.'

"I said, 'There's a reason for that.'

The crowd chuckled. Graham was referring to the moment during the Republican primary

FROM LEFT: FTC; JOSH EDGELSON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; JOHN ELSWICK/AFP/IMAGES; BEING PATRICK/FACEBOOK; ALLY BRANDON/AP IMAGES; SHUTTERSTOCK; SUMAN PAUL/EPIC/EFE



## THE LONG VIEW: THE FACEBOOK PROBLEM

2011	JAN. 2012	SEPT. 2017	OCT.	MARCH 2018	AUG.	OCT.
						
<b>FIRST WARNING</b> Federal Trade Commission fines Facebook for <b>privacy abuse</b> , including not disclosing that third-party apps were collecting users' data.	<b>GOODBYE, PRESS</b> Ads are introduced in the <b>News Feed</b> . By 2018, Facebook and Google will have 85 percent of the digital-ad market, destroying traditional media's revenue model.	<b>ABETTING TROLLS</b> After denying the platform played a role in 2016 election interference, Facebook finally admits a <b>Kremlin-linked "troll farm"</b> bought \$100,000 in divisive ads.	<b>VIRAL PROPAGANDA</b> Mark Zuckerberg discloses the scale of the 2016 disinformation campaign: <b>Russian fake accounts</b> reached 126 million Facebook users.	<b>WATERSHED MOMENT</b> News breaks that <b>Cambridge Analytica</b> , used by the Trump campaign, harvested 87 million users' private information to use in microtargeted ads, prompting investigations by the FTC, FBI, SEC, and DOJ, and calls for tighter regulations on data privacy.	<b>AMPLIFYING HATE</b> Posts dehumanizing <b>Rohingya Muslims</b> help spur ethnic cleansing that drives 700,000 Rohingya from Myanmar. Facebook's response: removing 20 accounts.	<b>ARBITER OF TRUTH</b> In an attempted <b>crackdown on disinformation</b> , Facebook purges more than 800 accounts. Many turn out to be legitimate activists or alternative-press outlets.

when Trump made a speech calling Graham an idiot – said he wasn't even as smart as Rick Perry – and then gave out his cellphone number, advising his supporters to "try it."

"The highlight of my campaign was when you gave out my phone number," Graham continued dryly, to more laughs from the room and a beaming nod from Trump. "If I did as well as my phone number, it probably would have been a different story."

Of course, the joke curdles a bit when you recall the context of the doxxing: Graham had provoked Trump's wrath by having the temerity to defend McCain, whom Trump had just mocked for being captured during Vietnam. Trump was a "jackass," Graham said at the time, predicting "the beginning of the end" for his campaign.

Four years later, at the White House event, Graham concluded his remarks with a different prediction for Trump: "When you run and you get re-elected a year from now, one of the main reasons is that people in the conservative world believe that you fight for judges. God bless you."

Steve Schmidt, who ran McCain's 2008 presidential campaign, where Graham was a constant presence on the trail, tells me, "We see more examples of this in film and literature, but there *are* instances of principled men and women laying down their careers in service of what is right. Clearly, that person will never be Lindsey Graham. With regard to the cruelty and abuse that was directed at John McCain by Trump, I think Lindsey's flaccidity in defending him says a lot about his character. Nobody wants to be in a bar fight when they go out on Friday night. But when someone walks up and



#### FOLLOW THE LEADER

Graham's popularity was tanking back home until his dramatic, angry defense of Trump's Supreme Court pick Brett Kavanaugh. Graham's poll numbers jumped 21 points. "Lindsey, in my opinion, has sold his mother to keep his job," says Graham's former law partner.

punches your best friend in the face, you've got to do something. Lindsey has demonstrated he's the guy who runs out the door."

Graham's former law partner in South Carolina, Larry Brandt, spoke with comparable bluntness when I visit him at his office in Walhalla, a sleepy town near Clemson. Graham clerked for Brandt while attending law school at the University of South Carolina. Brandt had served in Vietnam as an Air Force JAG – he's the type of Vietnam vet who will still, if Jane Fonda's name comes up, feel compelled to add "that bitch" – and the pair immediately hit it off. Graham had enlisted in the Air Force ROTC program when he started college and went on to serve as a JAG lawyer himself after graduation. In 1989, after leaving the service, Graham joined Brandt's firm, and they remain friends. "Lindsey always told me he wanted to be a politician," Brandt says, describing his former protégé as a tremendous trial lawyer. "Lindsey comes from common people, and being the plaintiff's lawyer, he was for the little guy."

Brandt has voted for Republicans and Democrats, but he loathes Donald Trump, "that 4-F sonofabitch." Nodding toward the window of the conference room where we're sitting, he says, "My flag's at half mast, and it ain't going up until Trump's gone." Over the years, Brandt says he's always stuck up for Graham back home, where his willingness to compromise has often left him unpopular with constituents, viewed with suspicion as a RINO (Republican in Name Only). But Brandt's been dismayed by Graham's shifting stance on the president. "He's laughed with me and said Trump's just like a little boy," Brandt says. "He will agree with me when I say shit about Trump, when it's me and him in here." They last spoke over the summer, when Graham called to see if Brandt wanted to get dinner. Brandt was vacationing in Texas, but he told Graham, "I want to talk to you about some things, and I'm gonna tell you now, I'm not with you on a bunch of your issues." They made plans to meet when Graham was back in August, but Brandt never heard from him.

One day, before Trump was elected, Graham visited Brandt at his office. "We were talking about politics, and he looked at me and said, 'Larry, you're too honest to be in politics,'" Brandt recalls. "He said, 'Eighty-five percent of the people in Washington, elected officials and bureaucrats, would sell their mothers to keep their jobs.' That's a direct quote." Two Christmases ago, Brandt ran into Graham at a restaurant in Seneca and reminded him of what he'd said. "He, of course, made a joke out of it," Brandt says. "But Lindsey, in my opinion, has sold his mother to keep his job."

**T**HE BUILDING where Graham grew up still stands at 217 Main St. in Central, South Carolina, a flyspeck of a town in the northwest corner of the state. I say "building" and not "house" because it's not a house, but the last in a row of low brick storefronts, mostly empty today, run-

TOP: DOUG MILLS/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX; BOTTOM: JIM MASTERS/STOCK, PABLO MARTINEZ MONSIVAIS/SHUTTERSTOCK; NO CREDIT; MARY ALTAFFER/AP IMAGES/SHUTTERSTOCK; ANDREW HARNIK/AP IMAGES/SHUTTERSTOCK

NOV.



**CRUSH DISSENT**  
Facebook admits COO **Sheryl Sandberg** requested opposition research on liberal billionaire George Soros after Soros called IT monopolies a "menace" to society.

DEC.



**INFO SHARING**  
Documents show Facebook gave tech giants like **Amazon** way more access to user data than had been disclosed, including access to users' private messages.

JULY 2019



**THE REGULATORS STRIKE BACK**  
Facebook draws a record fine of **\$5 billion** from the FTC, which says the platform "repeatedly used deceptive disclosures and settings to undermine users' privacy preferences."

SEPT.



**NO LESSONS LEARNED**  
Facebook says it will be allowing politicians to lie and spread **disinformation** on the site because the platform doesn't want to play "referee."

OCT.



**HERE WE GO AGAIN**  
Facebook and other platforms refuse to remove an ad from the Trump campaign spouting a **conspiracy theory** about Joe Biden and Ukraine.



**TRUST BUSTED**  
In congressional testimony, Zuck lays out his plans for **Libra**, the privately controlled global cryptocurrency he's trying to launch. What could possibly go wrong?

ning alongside a set of train tracks. Central got its name because of its location on the rail line, halfway between Atlanta and Charlotte. Graham's father, F.J., owned a bar called the Sanitary Cafe. The family lived in back, crowded into a single room, using the same restroom as the customers and a metal wash basin, with water heated on the stove, for bathing. Woodard, Graham's former campaign consultant, who also worked on races for Trey Gowdy and Jim DeMint, tells me that when Graham's relatives stopped by campaign headquarters, "It was like, have you seen the movie *Deliverance*?"

Graham helped run the family liquor store (the Sanitary Cafe having been sold) after both of his parents died in quick succession while he was still in college in the 1970s. One of the more revealing passages in Graham's anodyne 2015 campaign autobiography, *My Story*, comes when he discovers his aptitude for trials in law school. "Conducting a trial," he writes, "is like staging a play, and you're the writer, director, and principal actor. I was born to do it." Graham loved "injecting a little drama into the simplest things" – when introducing evidence, for example, he would rummage through his files before retrieving the correct page with a flourish, "in a voice that suggests an important discovery." Filtered through this lens, Graham's talent for sophistry in the defense of Trump makes a kind of sense, purely on the level of craft. Politics, like commanding attention in a courtroom, is performance. (Graham declined to be interviewed for this story.)

There's little disagreement about what has been Graham's pivotal performance of the Trump era: the Supreme Court confirmation hearings of Brett Kavanaugh, when Graham startled spectators with an uncharacteristic, snarling eruption at his Democratic colleagues (complete with the sort of dramatic business described by Graham in his book, including literal finger-wagging and a climactic shuffling of papers). "I will tell you none of that was scripted, nor did any of his staff know it was coming," a former senior member of Graham's Senate staff insists. "He's always had the view that as long as a Supreme Court nominee was qualified, the president gets his pick. He voted for Kagan and Sotomayor under Obama, which wasn't easy. And I think he looked at how the Democrats handled the Kavanaugh nomination and was deeply furious."

A lawmaker who knows Graham well watched the hearing with a more jaundiced eye. "To me, that was very, very ginned up," the ex-member said. "I watched that and went, 'Jesus Christ, come on!' It was theatrics. The right response would have been sarcastic clapping. Really, when he finished, someone should have gone, 'Nice speech, Lindsey!'"

Sincere or not, the moment had its desired effect. Trump loved the show, and Graham received credit for turning the tide of the hearing in Republicans' favor. More important, GOP voters in South Carolina, along with potential primary rivals – Graham is up for re-election in 2020 – took notice. Will Folks, the political blogger in South Carolina, describes Graham's

Kavanaugh defense as both "all playacting" and "the crowning moment of his latest ideological reorientation." Prior to the hearing, Folks tells me, "not only do I think Graham would have had a serious primary challenger, but he would have lost. I wrote an article in 2017 called 'Dead Senator Walking.' The polling was that bad. They would not piss on him if he was on fire, as the expression goes down here. There was a visceral hatred for the man."

John Warren, a Greenville businessman and Iraq War veteran, had been publicly talking about challenging Graham in 2020, telling Eric Bolling of the Blaze last year that South Carolina was "a great conservative state, and we deserve two conservative senators." But with Graham's popularity and fundraising prowess surging post-Kavanaugh defense – his poll numbers in South Carolina jumped 21 points after the hearing, from 51 percent in April 2018 to 72 percent in October 2018 – Warren quietly announced this fall that he wouldn't be running for any office in 2020. And Graham understood, more than ever, what his political survival depended upon. Though he ultimately answered to the voters back home, he served at the pleasure of the president.

**A**FTER GRAHAM'S PARENTS DIED, his sister, Darline, only 13 at the time, went to live with an aunt and uncle, but Graham became her guardian, coming home from college most weekends and eventually legally adopting her. As an Air Force lawyer in the 1980s, Graham defended clients who were going to be discharged after testing positive for marijuana by putting the sloppy lab protocol on trial, Barry Scheck-style, eventually making his national television debut when he was interviewed for a Diane Sawyer-anchored *60 Minutes* segment on the cases. He'd never been "political," he writes in *My Story*, until the election of Ronald Reagan, and being stationed in Germany during the final years of the Cold War cemented his hawkish foreign-policy views. Back in South Carolina, he won a state House of Representatives seat in 1992, and in 1994, riding a wave of conservative anger at Bill Clinton, he became the first Republican to represent South Carolina's 3rd Congressional District since before Reconstruction. "I'd like to think I was a genius, but I was just in the right place at the right time," says Woodard, Graham's campaign manager. "The main difference between Lindsey and his Democratic opponent was Lindsey had an 'R' next to his name, and people who couldn't stand Clinton wanted to send a message."

As a freshman member of Congress, Graham quickly cooled on Newt Gingrich. The frustrated group of Republicans who launched an unsuccessful coup against Gingrich in 1997 met in Graham's office to plot. (Gingrich resigned as speaker the following year.) "Lindsey is a good barometer," says Woodard. "He figured out his first week in office that Gingrich had a short shelf life. He was willing to say things against him as a freshman congressman! He's not an intellectual or an ideologue, he's not going to

write a book on the conservative mantle. But he will have a sense of when the tide is changing before anyone else in the room. He can read people – voters, but also colleagues – better than almost anyone I've seen."

One of the first examples of a particular genre of Graham profile, all painting him as a folksy voice of reason in an increasingly hard-line GOP, appeared in *The Washington Post* in 1998. Headlined "Lindsey Graham, a Twang of Moderation," the piece portrayed him as a droll, highly quotable country lawyer whose views on impeachment "are surprisingly compatible with President Clinton's." On the House floor, Graham had said that if the Clinton impeachment ended up being "about an extramarital affair with an intern, and that's it, I will not vote to impeach this president no matter if 82 percent of the people back home want me to, because we will destroy this country."

Substantively, though, the Graham of the Nineties was a fairly doctrinaire conservative, and in the end, he did vote to impeach Clinton. But his skill at being all things to all people, and his budding love of the media spotlight, was on full display in the *Post* story. When I speak with Bill McCollum, a former Republican House member from Florida who served alongside Graham as an impeachment manager, he praises the "quick mind" and "gentlemanly" manner of his colleague, but adds, "Even though I thought he was generally right, I would be remiss in not telling you people thought he could be too aggressive, out grabbing the mic."

## LINDSEY'S NEW VALUES

► "You don't have to say 'Let's obstruct justice' for it to be a crime," Graham said about impeaching President Bill Clinton in 1999. "Impeachment is about cleansing the office."

► "I've written the whole process off," Graham said, of Trump's impeachment, which he dismisses as a sham and the investigation a star-chamber inquiry. "I think this is a bunch of B.S."

**T**HE POST ARTICLE also described Graham's Air Force tour as "terrific fun for a young bachelor swinging his way through Paris and Rome." Graham himself, jokingly declining to discuss his "exploits," added, "I was very heterosexual, that's all you need to know." Graham's lifelong bachelorhood has been a subject of unsubstantiated speculation, and homophobic baiting, for years. During the Clinton impeachment, anonymous callers left messages at his office threatening to out him. On *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart did an impression of Graham as a mincing Scarlett O'Hara. In 2002, when Graham decided to run for Senate – the arch segregationist Strom Thurmond finally announced his retirement at age 99 – Dick Harpoontian, the chair of the state Democratic Party, said Graham was a little too "light in the loafers" to fill Thurmond's shoes. "I know it's really gonna upset a lot of gay men... but I ain't available. I ain't gay. Sorry," Graham told *The New York Times Magazine* in 2010.

The rumors are only relevant insofar as Graham's record on gay rights, which, according to the Human Rights Campaign, an LGBTQ civil-rights organization, has been largely atrocious. The group describes Graham as "a consistent opponent of everything from marriage equality to protecting LGBTQ workers from employment discrimination" (though in 2015, he called for the GOP to drop its demand for a constitutional amendment defining marriage as between a woman and a man).

Woodard points out that Thurmond had an illegitimate black daughter he'd kept secret until his death. "There's always this feeling that what you see in a South Carolina politician is not what you get, that there's something in the closet," he says. But Woodard doesn't believe Graham is gay. "I kept his daily schedule, and if I wasn't with him, I knew who was," Woodard says. "In 1994, in fact, we had all these women after him. They'd hold these fundraisers and invite him over. Lindsey would tell me later, 'It was a trap, Dave! Don't ever send me back over there.' But I never suspected he was anything other than an affable bachelor."

As a senator, Graham quickly allied himself with McCain, whom he'd supported over George W. Bush in the ugly South Carolina Republican primary in 2000. "His foreign policy and immigration positions were soon indistinguishable from those of his mentor," according to *The New York Times*, which effectively meant there wasn't a war Graham didn't support, but also that he would become a member of the Gang of Eight, a bipartisan group of senators that passed a comprehensive immigration reform bill in 2013, only to see it killed by conservatives in the House. The former Democratic staffer tells me, "He got the immigration issue, and it was clearly for the right reasons. There wasn't a great deal of political upside in South Carolina for him to go whole hog on it."

During the Obama years, in fact, Graham found himself assailed by conservatives as he became one of the only Republicans willing to work with the administration. An article in *Politico* called Graham and Rahm Emanuel, Obama's chief of staff, "D.C.'s odd couple," noting that, by 2010, Graham had "had more in-person meetings with Emanuel than any other Republican." The former Graham staffer told me that if an issue was big and complicated and seemed unsolvable, Graham was drawn to it. "He liked to try to put the puzzle together in a way that would bring Republicans and Democrats together, which often meant swallowing policies that weren't his preference, as long as he believed he got something in return."

Part of Graham's skill at consensus building came down to his personal charm. "Everyone likes having him around," Schmidt acknowledges. "He's a genuinely funny guy." After Trump's election, according to Bob Woodward's *Fear*, then-White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus urged Graham to broach a rapport with the new president, telling him, "You're a lot of fun. He needs fun people around him." In Woodward's account of their first Oval Office meeting, in March 2017, an anecdote for which Graham seems the likely source, the senator entered with a prepared speech. Trump jumped up to hug him, declaring, "We've got to be friends." Graham said he wanted that, and told Trump, "I want to apologize to you for a very fucked-up Republican majority. Congress is going to fuck up your presidency. We have no idea what we're doing. We have no plan for health care. We're on different planets when it comes to cutting taxes. And you're the biggest loser in this." And then

the silver-tongued country lawyer appealed to Trump's ego, telling him, "You're a deal-maker. These leaders in Congress don't know how to do something as simple as buying a house.... There are not five people on Capitol Hill I'd let buy me a car. I'd let you buy me a car."

Perhaps early on, Graham thought he could work Trump with flattery. The new president must have certainly made a tempting target for anyone skilled at manipulation. If you could stomach sucking up to the guy, ignore all but the very worst of his racism, bullying, and vulgarity, and then whisper your own policy preferences in his ear, details of which he would have zero interest in, other than how they might represent a "win" for him – well, maybe



#### STAND BY YOUR MAN

"Lindsey has a real draw to power," says John McCain's former campaign director Steve Schmidt, "but he's found it unattainable on his own merits." McCain, who was a sharp critic of Trump, had been Graham's mentor and closest ally in the Senate.

his cult of personality could be used to advance sensible conservative goals. That would be the charitable reading of what I'll call the Paul Ryan Approach, an approach Graham, who'd never stopped hammering Trump during the campaign, quickly adopted. In the Woodward book, Steve Bannon describes Graham as "the best salesman around," saying that Trump "loves Graham. Graham can sell him anything." (Graham also told Bannon "that America First is bullshit. This is all bullshit.")

The big test of Graham's salesmanship came on immigration, the issue that Trump has so successfully demagogued upon. Graham was trying to help broker a new deal, one in which Trump would agree to extend the Dream Act, the program protecting undocumented immigrants who'd been brought to the United States as children, in exchange for more money on border security from Democrats. Then came the infamous meeting in which Trump referred to poor, non-white countries as "shitholes." "Senator Graham was incensed," the Democratic Senate staffer tells me. "He said directly to the president, 'My forefathers came from a shithole country, too, and look at me now.'"

As Ryan also quickly learned, hopes that Trump might begin to curb his worse impulses proved fanciful. "Anybody who thinks he's going to have a moderating influence on Trump pretty much always ends up going, 'Well, that

idea didn't work,'" says Al Franken, who served alongside Graham on the Senate Judiciary Committee. "For Lindsey, 'I can see every angle, and I have influence with Trump so he doesn't go off the deep end' is a good talking point. But I don't think it's shown any benefits."

With his House majority doomed, Ryan announced his retirement. Graham, though, persisted, to the bewilderment of even those who'd worked closely with him. "When Senator Graham really began courting the president – golfing all the time with him, saying flattering things on cable news – it felt like he wanted to be the attorney general, or there was some other play there," the Democratic Senate staffer says. "Initially we thought, 'Well, if he ingratiate himself to the president, it helps us on immigration.' Then there was a turn. He got much Trumpier. He became a blind defender of the president's policies, no matter what, his fingers in his ears, 'I'm not interested in the facts, just here to support the president.' Which is where he is today. I'm sure I'm not alone wondering what Senator McCain would think."

When I ask Schmidt, McCain's former senior campaign adviser, about the "moderating influence on Trump" defense of Graham's behavior, he snorts. "It's ludicrous," he says, "but despite its ludicrousness, this will be one of the fundamental arguments in

American politics for the next 25 years. 'No, no, you don't understand: I was secretly against him while he was debasing his office, dividing the American people, engaged in all manner of abuses of power. I was on the front lines of Mar-a-Lago preventing this!' It's an absurdity. For most Republicans, the simple fact is, what they now claim to believe is at odds with what they claimed to believe three years ago. Look at what Lindsey said in 2015 and what he says today. What intervening event occurred that would lend oneself to have such a strong turn?"

A senior staffer at a nonprofit Washington-based advocacy group who has worked with Graham for more than a decade tells me, "Graham is the most nervous primary politician I've ever seen. Even if he doesn't have a credible challenger on the right, he goes into overdrive, and I mean overdrive." As 2020 approached, Graham was certainly paying attention to his right-leaning primary electorate back home. South Carolina is an aging state, popular with retirees – the fastest-growing age demographic is residents 85 or older. "Ten years from now, I think South Carolina is going to be the most conservative state in the country," the staffer predicted.

Franken sees Graham's rightward tack as evidence of a fundamental cynicism. Once, shortly before the Christmas recess, Graham bumped into Franken in the hallway and [Cont. on 96]

# The Viral Murder of Bianca Devins

*The 17-year-old tried to escape her reality by living online – but when men started to ‘orbit’ her, she didn’t understand the danger she was in*

By EJ DICKSON

**O**N INSTAGRAM SHE WAS “escty,” the Lolita goth princess, pouting and preening next to heart-shaped handcuffs, Louis Vuitton-branded handguns, and bound-and-gagged Hello Kittys. She was also “beegtfo,” the girl next door, mugging with her sister in Christmas photos, donning pastel barrettes and holding her toddler half-sister to her hip. She was “oxiecontin,” the teen queen of darkness, boozy-eyed and bruise-kneed in short plaid skirts and Converse, smoking and rolling her eyes as her world collapsed around her (“literally so tired and everything’s annoying and I’m going through an episode lol,” she wrote).

On Tumblr she was “switchblades,” on 4chan she was “Oxy,” on Snapchat she was “virgovenus,” and on Discord she was “bia.” The people who loved her called her Bia, or Bee. Those who hated her (mostly men, mostly strangers) called her an e-whore, or a BPD (borderline personality disorder) slut, or a “roastie,” incel slang for a sexually active woman. Because she grew up on the internet, where such slurs are the currency of the chronically irate, she’d learned not to mind this so much. “When people call me things like bpd slut it’s kinda funny . . . and hot. and i oop,” she wrote on the anonymous Q&A app Tellonym, referencing a meme, intending to convey mock embarrassment.

In real life, the girl stole TRUMP 2016 signs from her neighbor’s lawn and helped organize a student walkout after the Parkland shooting. She’d spend hours counseling a teenage girl she’d never met through her mental-health issues, or drawing a stranger’s portrait; an overweight, bullied kid in her earth-science class would later say that she was the only girl in high school to have ever been nice to him. She



**DEADLY ORBIT** The more she posted, the more strangers lurked around Devins online.

loved babies, kittens, chocolate-fudge brownies, *The Breakfast Club*, and buying pastel wigs to do cosplay shoots with her best friend; the only thing she struggled to love was herself.

The girl’s real name, the one that people would later learn for all the wrong reasons, was Bianca Michelle Devins. She was only 17 years old when she died, and she spent most of her very short life trying to build one that was, if not happier, more compelling, strange, and beautiful than her own.

BIANCA DEVINS LIVED and died in Utica, an upstate New York city about an hour east of Syracuse. Formerly an industrial powerhouse, Utica, which has a population of about 62,000, suf-

fered a major economic downturn along with other Rust Belt cities during the mid- to late-20th century, and has yet to fully recover. It’s well-known for college hockey, its large Italian population (“Utica greens,” or escarole sautéed with prosciutto and sundry spices, is a popular regional dish), and its relatively high crime rate. “You turn on the news and there’s usually something about someone getting shot,” says Rachel Shanley, one of Bianca’s middle school friends. Though the state has invested millions into a revitalization project as thousands of immigrants and refugees reinvigorate the city, Utica often appears downcast, regardless of the weather. On a crisp, 64-degree September day, the streets

were void of pedestrians, even as the sun shone bright in the sky.

But the city also fosters allegiance among natives – though some people complain about it, many choose to stay. “It’s a very comfortable area to live and to raise kids,” says Tom Holt, Bianca’s cousin. “A lot of times people say, ‘Oh, I gotta go away and go to a big school,’ but there is opportunity down here.” Bianca wasn’t in a rush to leave, either. At the time of her death, she was slated to attend Mohawk Valley Community College, a school 15 minutes away from her home, to major in psychology. “She was going to come home to do laundry,” says her mother, Kim, 36, in her living room. “She didn’t want to be too far away from us.”

The Devins’ four-bedroom home is warm and overcrowded, with flower appliqués and framed adages on the walls, a pastel plush unicorn, and multicolored Legos strewn on the floor. When I visit, the living room is covered in orange-and-black papier-mâché pumpkins and streamers, even though Halloween is more than a month away. Kim and her younger daughter, Olivia, share the home with her friend Kaleigh Rimmer, the ex-girlfriend of Kim’s ex-husband, Mike; Rimmer’s ex Cody Meulengracht; and Rimmer’s four children, who clamber in and out of the living room throughout the afternoon. It’s easy to imagine why a teenage girl would spend time holed up in a tiny room, playing *Minecraft* and being sad and talking to other sad kids on the internet, which is, in fact, what Bianca spent much of her time doing.

A former human-resources and payroll manager, Kim grew up just a few blocks away from where she now lives. She got pregnant with Bianca when she was a 17-year-old Catholic-school junior, and had only been dating her ex-husband, Mike, now a mechanic, for a few months; Kim shows me a photo of her right before her pregnancy, dressed up for an ‘NSync concert with her hair in two buns.

When Kim found out she was pregnant, she was terrified. But there was never any question as to whether she would continue with the pregnancy. “My mom always said she knew she wanted to be a mom,” she says. “It’s all she ever wanted to do. And I always felt like that too.”

Bianca was born October 2nd, 2001, while Olivia, or Liv, Bianca’s younger sister, arrived two years later. Bianca adored her younger sister and was highly protective of her; Kim says that even while she was pregnant with Liv, Bianca would proudly show off the sonogram photo of her “sissy.”

In 2010, Kim says, she and Mike split up for the first time. Mike was “emotionally abusive,” she alleges, and Utica police say Kim filed multiple domestic-incident complaints. As Bianca, Kim’s self-appointed defender, got older, she increasingly bore the brunt of his anger, according to Kim. Mike left for good in 2015, maintaining little contact with Bianca. (Mike Devins did not return multiple requests for comment.)

Kim says Bianca was relieved by her father’s departure, but also felt abandoned by him. “When he was in her life, he was a good dad,” says Kim. “When he wasn’t, he wasn’t. He was out.” (Both Bianca’s best friend, Gianna Murray, and Gianna’s mother, Erica, confirm this assessment.)

According to Kim, Bianca’s struggles with mental illness began when she entered middle school at Notre Dame Junior/Senior High School. Although Bianca had experienced separation anxiety in third grade, she had been relatively extroverted and popular until she reached adolescence, at which point “she just lost interest in everything,” Kim says. Though Bianca would open up to a select few who shared her love of anime or drawing or the Japanese virtual singing app Vocaloid, most people who knew her in middle or high school viewed her as shy and anxious, and Rachel Shanley says that she was “kinda on her own.”

Kim says she took Bianca to a series of therapists, most of whom were unable to help her. She says it was Bianca’s difficulty navigating the mental-health-care system that led to her eventually deciding to study psychology at community college.

In ninth grade, Bianca transferred to Thomas R. Proctor High School, a public school with more than 2,700 students, because her family could no longer afford Notre Dame’s tuition after the divorce. Despite her striking appearance and 5-foot-10 frame, at Proctor, Bianca was not known as one of the popular girls. “She wasn’t the five-four, tan, Italian, dark-hair-to-her-butt pretty, which is the standard pretty in upstate New York,” says Mae Scialdone, a local photographer who mentored Bianca. “Up here, more people saw her as different, like, ‘What’s up with that girl?’”

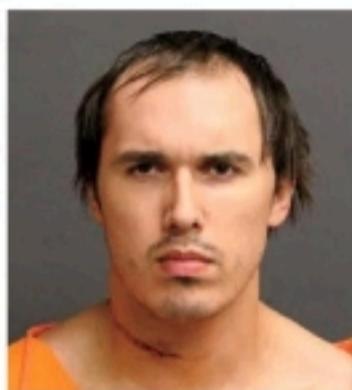
One person who felt otherwise was Derek Ward, a soft-spoken, tattooed Robert Pattinson look-alike who worked for a time at a plastics company in Utica. Ward and Bianca started dating their freshman year. “I could tell her anything,” he says. “She was probably the best therapist I ever had.” As their relationship progressed, they also



**FAMILY TIES** Above: Younger sister Olivia, Bianca, and mom Kim. “I fought for her for so long,” Kim says.

**TEENAGE DREAMS**  
Right: Bianca felt isolated in school and created various online personas to help fill the void.

**THE KILLER** Below: Clark befriended Bianca online and became obsessed; he posted images of her murder.



bonded over their chaotic family lives. “She’d tell me how she would babysit the kids,” Ward says. “I mean, there’s a lot of kids in that house. [That’s] a lot of stuff to put on one person’s plate.”

Those in Utica who knew Bianca said that she was a supportive and kindhearted friend. But they also described her behavior as occasionally erratic. Some of it was mildly eccentric, even charming, and could be attributed to the quirks of an off-beat teenage girl, such as her fondness for cutting off all of her hair and dying it on a whim, or running around Walmart with a lampshade on her head. Some of it, however, was concerning. Bianca’s friends tell me she had a tendency to lie about minor details of her life, explaining to one high school friend that she was Jewish and on the autism spectrum or, according to an ex-boyfriend, claiming that she was of Cuban and Asian descent.

Ward’s friend Devon Barnes says that Bianca had become paranoid about Ward talking to other girls, and that Ward and Bianca would frequently fight. Their relationship ended when she abruptly cut off all contact with him, ghosting him and their friends without explanation and disappearing from school for weeks at a time.

Such behavior is consistent with borderline personality disorder, an illness characterized by emotional instability, negative self-image, impulsive behavior, and fear of abandonment. While Bianca wouldn’t be officially diagnosed with BPD until 2018, Kim says, by high school her mental illness had reached the point that she was no longer willing to leave the house. Around that time, a therapist diagnosed Bianca with post-traumatic stress disorder, and Cody Meulengracht says she was triggered by loud noises and shouting. “By the time she’d be ready to go to

school, she’d have a panic attack and say, ‘I can’t do it,’” Kim says. “Or she’d end up in the nurse’s office and have to come home.” In 2017, midway through Bianca’s sophomore year, Kim decided to enroll her in a homebound tutoring program.

Stuck at home all day, Bianca began to further retreat into her online world. “She would just always be on her phone,” says Gianna Murray, one of the few people Bianca had contact with during this time. “Like, if I brought people over, she didn’t know how to interact, I guess.” On Tumblr, she crafted elaborate identities for herself, which varied widely in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. These identities, it seems, were part teen-girl experimentation, part safeguards against doxxing or harassment, and part self-marketing tool. “She’d always create a persona that would best suit who she’s talking to or the community she’s talking to that would keep them interested,” says Young Shim, one of Bianca’s longtime online acquaintances. “So they’d feel like, ‘Hey, I have a really cool best friend that I can relate to.’”

But the persona that ended up getting the most attention was one that was very similar to who Bianca really was: a sweet, shy, nerdy girl who was young, beautiful, and very, very sad.

**W**HEN REPORTS of Bianca’s murder began to emerge, the media referred to her as an “Instagram celebrity,” which was largely incorrect: Bianca had only about 2,000 followers – not insignificant, but far from a huge following. There was, however, one community where she did achieve some degree of notoriety: 4chan, the anonymous image-board community.

Today, 4chan is widely known as a bastion of far-right extremism. But this perception largely stems from /pol/, the board known as a recruiting ground for white nationalists, says Joshua Citarella, a researcher who studies online communities and Gen Z culture. While not everyone on 4chan harbors far-right views, they tend to dominate discussions on many other boards, such as /r9k/, which Bianca frequented. “The far-right propaganda that’s on 4chan just kind of leaked into /r9k/ along with the racism and misogyny that really flourishes on /pol/ specifically,” says Citarella.

Ostensibly, /r9k/ is a forum for posting original content. In practice, however, it’s “a bunch of loner-type people hanging around talking about being depressed and why they’re depressed,” says Shim, who met [Cont. on 94]

# The Rise & Resilience of

# ELIZABETH

# WARREN



## The Rolling Stone Interview

**IT'S LATE NOVEMBER AT THE** Val Air Ballroom in West Des Moines, Iowa, a Forties dance hall converted from a World War I tire factory with ancient plumbing and a buzzing neon sign. Sen. Elizabeth Warren is listed on the marquee just above the cage fights and the craft show taking place next month. Hundreds of people have crowded onto the well-worn maple floor: old ladies in *NEVERTHELESS SHE PERSISTED* T-shirts, college students home for Thanksgiving, young couples with small kids. ★ But not everyone who has shown up tonight is sold on Elizabeth Warren. (A middle-aged man behind me says he's choosing between Tom Steyer and Michael Bloomberg — "I'm going to see who makes me a better offer.") And that's why she's here, at her 169th town hall: to tell her story, answer questions, take selfies, convert the skeptics, and assure her existing supporters that she's still the right choice — that she can pull this thing off. ★ All summer and into the fall, Warren was rising steadily in the polls, starring in viral town-hall moments, baiting billionaires, and unveiling dozens of ambitious policy proposals — from canceling student debt to rolling out universal child care. She was not the front-runner yet, but the one who would probably win it in the end, assuming, as many overconfident political observers did, that any minute now the bottom would drop out of Joe Biden's campaign, and that Bernie Sanders was too old, Pete Buttigieg too young and inexperienced, and the rest of the pack too far behind to catch up. ★ Now, it's almost

On the campaign trail in Iowa with the progressive warrior as she tries to prove she's the Democrats' best chance to beat Trump

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BY TESSA STUART

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PHOTOGRAPH  
BY PEGGY  
SIROTA



December, and the lead she held here for months has abruptly disappeared.

Things started to turn a few weeks earlier, the moment Warren passed Biden in the national poll average. A widely circulated *New York Times*-Siena poll showed her losing to Trump in head-to-head matchups in battleground states. President Obama made pointed remarks cautioning candidates against getting too bold in their policy proposals. She was dog-piled at the debate, pressured to explain how she would pay for Medicare for All. The plan her team produced neither satisfied supporters nor reassured skeptics.

Each piece of doubt put a little bit more drag on her upward trajectory, compounding uncertainty that she could win in a general election. For the entire race, she has been leading in polls that ask Democrats who they *want* to be president, but when the question becomes who do they think can beat Donald Trump, Biden pulls ahead.

"The question is, can she put together the message, the energy and the organization, the resources to win," says Stephanie Schriock of the female fundraising group EMILY'S List, who recruited Warren to run for Senate in 2012. "Because nothing makes you electable until you start winning. That's it. You gotta start winning."

The uptempo piano notes clack out of the Val Air loudspeaker with the dulcet voice of Dolly Parton singing "9 to 5." Warren, 70, jogs onstage and beams out at the crowd. She's traded in her signature jewel-tone jacket for a navy hoodie with the campaign's slogan, DREAM BIG, FIGHT HARD, on the back. She launches into the childhood memory that has, over hundreds of retellings, transformed into her political origin story.

Her brothers – eight, 12, and 16 years older – had all grown up and joined the military by the time she was in middle school, when their father suffered a heart attack, lost his job, and the family's financial troubles began. Their station wagon was repossessed, and it looked like the house would be next. That's when her mother put on the nicest dress she owned, walked to the local department store, and got a minimum-wage job. The story always ends the same way: Warren's voice rising as she tells the audience that while that job was just barely enough for her family to stay in their home and cover their bills in the 1960s, "today, a full-time minimum-wage job will not keep a baby and mama out of poverty. That is wrong, and that is why I am in this fight."

But an entire lifetime elapsed between those events and Warren's decision to get into politics. In between, she went to college, dropped out, got married, had two kids, completed her degree, began teaching, graduated from law school, divorced, and remarried, to Bruce Mann, a fellow law professor.

"This is somebody that had a life that was not about what was going on in Washington, but whose life was affected by the decisions that were *made* in Washington," says Rep. Katie Porter, a former student and mentee of Warren's at

Harvard Law School who flipped a House seat in conservative Orange County, California, in 2018. "Decisions that get made about child-care policy, decisions that get made about opportunities for women in the workforce."

It's easy to forget that this is only the third campaign Warren has ever run. Unlike Buttigieg, who has known he wanted to be president since before he knew how to drive, or Biden, stumbling through his third Oval Office attempt in four decades, or Sanders, singularly focused on holding public office since 1971, Warren never really wanted to be in politics. She was drafted.

"She was having a barbecue for some of her students at her home, and I called her," says former Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. "She couldn't hear me – I don't talk very loud on the phone, you know? So finally I raised my voice and I said who I was, and I wanted her to come to Washington."

As a law professor, Warren had done years of research showing that most people who declared bankruptcy weren't deadbeat system-cheats. They were, more often than not, middle-class people who had experienced some kind of tragedy: lost a job, got sick, divorced. Reid wanted her to sit on a bipartisan committee overseeing the Troubled Asset Relief Program, the Treasury Department's \$700 billion Hail Mary to shore up the financial system after the 2008 crash.

Warren's merciless grilling of Treasury officials catapulted her into the national spotlight – she was articulating the outrage of millions of Americans who lost their homes while bankers were bailed out. She also worked with the Senate to hammer out the Dodd-Frank financial-reform legislation that would create the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, an agency Warren proposed in 2007. When Republicans threatened to block her appointment as the agency's administrator, Obama made her a special adviser to the Treasury secretary instead.

Obama adviser Valerie Jarrett recalls fielding panicked calls from finance people who were concerned about Dodd-Frank, the CFPB, and Warren – concerns not dissimilar to ones Jarrett says she's hearing about Warren's candidacy today. "I think she is a very fair and pragmatic leader, and I just think they should take a deep breath," Jarrett says of Warren's critics.

Jarrett was among those who began urging Warren to run for Senate. "She did not jump at the opportunity," recalls Schriock. "Over many hours and lots and lots of iced tea, we sat down and I made the case." Warren said she would consider it, but first she was going to California to see her grandkids. Not long after, Schriock got a call from Legoland: Warren was in.

Massachusetts had never elected a woman to statewide office. And there were a lot of people, Schriock remembers, who were adamant that a woman couldn't win. But Warren took the race by seven and a half points. "People should not underestimate her," says Reid. "I think some people are doing that, and that's a mistake."

If Warren is going to stage a comeback in the 2020 race, it'll start here in Iowa, where the idiosyncrasies of the caucus system don't just allow



**"THE ELECTION IS ABOUT THINGS THAT HAVE BEEN BROKEN FOR DECADES IN THIS COUNTRY."**

for surprises, they practically guarantee them. The Val Air is a monument to that unpredictability. It was the site in 2004 of Howard Dean's scream, the guttural yowl that sent the Vermont governor's bid into a death spiral after his unexpected defeat here. He, too, had been leading an absurdly large field of Democrats competing for the chance to take on a historically unpopular president. "This thing is early," says Schriock, who worked for Dean's campaign. "It's going to be wild."

After Warren finished her stump speech and answered questions, and after she took more than an hour posing with every last person in the selfie line – squeezing hands, gripping shoul-



Warren at the Val Air Ballroom in West Des Moines. The campaign has more than 20 offices in Iowa alone.

ders, making pinky swears — she huddled backstage with a handful of young campaign volunteers, shoring up the faith.

“Every single day that you get out and knock on a door, make a phone call, talk to somebody, you move us just a little bit closer,” Warren tells them. “Every time you pull in somebody, you spark that little bit of hope. Because, ultimately, what this is really about is persuading people that their voices matter enough, their votes matter enough, that it’s worth showing up for, it’s worth getting in the fight. And that, that little bit of hope — your little bit of hope, combined with my little bit of hope, and the hope of people all across Iowa — is what can change this country.”

**You walk out to Dolly Parton — have you always been a fan?**

Dolly Parton? Oh, yeah. Although I have to admit, my number one is Patsy Cline.

**What draws you to Patsy Cline?**

You know she only had about a 10-year career? But she was always a woman who stood alone. And just had this voice that kind of — whatever you’re doing, she could reach inside your chest, grab your heart and twist it a quarter-turn.

**Did you grow up listening to country?**

Yeah — Hank Williams. I thought everybody listened to Hank Williams. That was the kind of music we were around. That, and rock & roll. Remember, I have three older brothers.

**I’ve heard two of them are Republicans.**

Uh-huh.

**Do you argue about politics?**

Well, we have very different views about particular political issues when it comes up. And this has been true for a long, long, long time. When I talk with my brothers, it’s much more about what’s right in the country than what’s wrong in the country. We talk a lot about worry — that young people today have fewer opportunities to succeed than young people had years ago. It’s not true for everyone, but the notion that I could go to a college that cost \$50 dollars a semester — that opportunity’s just not out there. That my brothers could go to the military without a col-

lege degree, and that was a pathway to a solid middle-class life.

**You were a Republican for much of your adult life. Does that give you an advantage to understand conservative voters, to be able to tailor your message?**

I would describe it not so much as tailoring as finding the part in the heart where we ultimately, as Americans, agree with each other. Much of the conversation that I now have publicly about corruption — how the rich guys are sucking up all the wealth and leaving everyone else behind — is a long-running conversation I've been having with my brothers for decades. They get it. My Democrat brother and my two Republican brothers understand that the rules for billionaires and corporate executives are not the same as the rules for their kids. And they don't like it. And neither do I.

**Your family had financial trouble when you were a kid. Obviously, it's shaped your political philosophy, but I'm curious how it impacted your personal relationship with money.**

I've always been afraid there won't be enough money. Always. I've always saved. I've always watched the prices of everything. And I've always worried about the rest of my family, worried about making sure everyone is OK.

**Was your decision to go back to college after you dropped out to get married motivated by a need to feel financially self-sufficient?** You're right, it has that effect. But it was the other way round. I wanted to be a teacher. I've wanted to be a teacher since second grade. When I dropped out of school at 19 and got married, I thought I'd given that up. I knew that theoretically I could go back to school, but it would cost money. Finding a commuter college that cost \$50 a semester was a door swinging open in a way that I had thought was impossible. So there I was, I could pay for it. And now that I could pay for it, I could be a teacher.

**Your dad was the breadwinner before he had a heart attack, and your mom had to go to work to provide for your family. You often describe your mom as encouraging you to get married rather than pursue your education, almost setting you up to end up in the same position she was in.**

I think she would have described it as "Be very careful about the man you marry." That was the pathway to success, not "Go create a path for your own financial independence." Now, it took a lot of courage for my mother at 50 to take on her first full-time job. But it was never something she was happy about. She didn't say, "What a great and fulfilling opportunity that was!" She saw it as work born of necessity, because she had to take care of her family and she wanted me to be safe. And to her dying days she still believed that the best way for a woman to be safe was to be married to a man who earned good money.

**One of the things that I'm struck by is that, in just the past five years, you went from advocating for incremental changes — I'm thinking of the Buffett Rule, which would have lowered student-loan interest rates, versus**

**the wealth tax, which would wipe out student debt altogether. Did you make a conscious decision to get bolder, or was it a function of the political climate?**

I'm actually going to argue with you on the premise of the question. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau is big structural change. For a decade, a handful of consumer advocates and researchers had seen what was happening with deceptive mortgages, cheating credit-card companies, and really horrible payday loans. And every one of them had a little piece of the solution. "Let's change this rule on mortgages. Let's put in a new protection on credit cards. Let's do something different about regulating payday loans." My idea was to build an agency that would fundamentally change the relationship between the government, credit issuers, and tens of millions of customers. The government would act very much like the Consumer

try really hard to break that agency, but it hasn't happened.

**The slate of plans you've proposed would be financed by a wealth tax — an idea that wasn't in the mainstream before you proposed it. What was the moment that made you decide to target accumulated wealth, and what gave you the confidence Americans were ready for this idea?**

The truly wealthy in this country aren't making their money through working and producing the kind of income that ordinarily gets taxed. Instead, they've built great fortunes that now have their own money managers and PR firms to protect those fortunes and make those fortunes grow, and, boy, are they growing — they are growing faster than incomes all around this country.

**But what was the moment for you, specifically, when you decided to take this on, when you decided this could catch on in America?**

I had a conversation with some tax specialists who showed me how much more money there was tied up in great fortunes than in annual incomes. In other words, they showed how much more money a two-cent wealth tax would raise, even though it's only on the top one-tenth of one percent.

A wealth tax is a tax on accumulated fortunes, not on [the income of] people that are going out and working every day. It's time for us to look at those fortunes and think about the kind of country we want to be. Do we think it's more important to keep [the people who own] those fortunes from paying two cents on the dollar or to have the money to invest in an entire generation?

**How would you implement your agenda if the Supreme Court blocks the wealth tax? When you were developing the plan, was that a possibility you discussed?**

I went at this the other way: I talked to a lot of the country's top constitutional scholars, and they were confident that the wealth tax fits within Supreme Court precedents and that, if someone raised an objection, [the tax] could be drafted in a way to meet any challenge.

**You've described yourself as a capitalist at heart — you believe in markets. But you've got a plan that would end the market in health insurance, and to a certain extent, student loans. Was your faith in capitalism shaken by the outcomes those markets produced?**

I have always understood that some markets just don't work. We invest in public education because a market for first grade will not get our children educated. We invest in roads and bridges because a market for infrastructure won't open up the opportunities we need to make this economy grow. So I believe in markets, but there are two important limits. One is, there are some areas that are not market-driven, and health care is one of them. Second, markets without rules are theft. So even in places where markets can work, the government has a role to play in making sure that the rules create a level playing field and that those rules are consistently enforced.

**President Obama said recently that Democrats' plans need to be "rooted in reality." Do**

## "I BELIEVE IN MARKETS, BUT THERE ARE LIMITS. MARKETS WITHOUT RULES ARE THEFT."



Safety Commission and say, in the same way that you can't sell a toaster that has a one-in-five chance of burning down your house, no one gets to sell a mortgage that has a one-in-five chance of costing a family their home.

**Is it hard for you to see what's happened to the CFPB under Trump?**

No. I mean, look, do I dislike his current director? Yes. Because she [Kathy Kraninger] has made clear she is on the side of the lenders, not the consumers. Mick Mulvaney did everything he could to try to hobble the consumer agency. But here's the great thing about how that agency worked: When it's got a good strong director, it's nimble, and can move forward fast, and that's exactly what it did in the first five years of its existence. And when it's got someone who is trying to sabotage its work, it holds steady. It hasn't gone backwards. The rules haven't gotten easier. The agency still does its supervisory work, which is way out of the headlines. So I think, if anything, what Mulvaney has shown is you can



## LIFE LESSONS

"She had a reputation as a tough but excellent teacher," says Rep. Katie Porter, a former student of Warren's at Harvard. "She has the kind of energy that when she would enter the room, you would know she was there and you didn't even have to turn around." Clockwise from top: Teaching at the University of Pennsylvania in the early Nineties; at 22, with daughter, Amelia; being appointed special adviser to the Treasury, 2010; her wedding day, 1980, with husband Bruce Mann.



### **you think that's a fundamental misreading of this political moment?**

I think of the fight I'm waging as very much rooted in reality – the reality that someone crushed by student-loan debt can't buy a home, or start a small business, or make much traction of any kind in building some financial security. People with young children, or who are considering having babies, are caught right now in a reality that child care is wildly expensive, and often not even available at any price. A plan for universal child care is rooted in *their* reality.

**One of your earliest forays into politics was battling Joe Biden in the Nineties over bankruptcy reform. There was a big difference back then in your two worldviews. Do you have those same differences today?**

Our differences are a matter of public record, and I haven't changed any of my views. The fundamental problem I see in Washington today is the influence of money. The giant corporations who can spread it around, the billionaires who can buy influence, the lobbyists who are there every day to advance the views of those who pay them well to attend every meeting. It's why my campaign starts around this question of how power is distributed. Our government works great for those with lots of money and not so much for anyone else. And that's been a problem for a long, long time.

### **Did you get the sense that he ever grasped your criticism of the bankruptcy bill?**

I don't want to go back and relitigate 15 years ago.

**I'm curious whether you think more Americans are in debt today because of that bill that Biden championed.**

Let me say it the other way: A lot fewer people can get the help they need today because of the change in the laws. That's what the research I did with my co-authors [showed]. There's been so much work on this, too, about families caught in financial hell who can't get any help because the bankruptcy laws were tightened to the point of suffocation back in 2005.

A year out from the election, head-to-head polling shows Biden beating Trump in some battleground states, and you losing to him. More than 40 percent of those who said they would support Biden but not you also said women who run for president "aren't very likable." What do you even do with that information?

I think about the last three years, and the role that women have played in politics. Plain old electoral politics. Look, I went to Trump's swearing in. I thought it was important. I know others decided not to. I come from a witnessing tradition: I wanted to see it with my own eyes. I wore my Planned Parenthood scarf wrapped around my neck to keep me warm, and watched as he was sworn in. I remember flying back to Massachusetts that night and thinking, "They could take away health care from tens of millions of people by next Friday." The Republicans controlled the House, the Senate, and the White House. What have we got left? What are we going to do? And, chewing on that as I went to bed that night, got up early the next morning, and then went to the Women's March and saw exactly what we could do. We could come together, and we could raise our voices, and we could make change. I spoke at the Women's March on Boston Common and I realized: This is how we're gonna do it.

It's women who have been in the fight for a long time, but it's also women who are coming into the fight for the first time. And friends of women: men who were completely taken aback by what had happened in 2016. Do you remember the coverage on this? You have to really kind of go back and remind yourself. [After] the Women's March, ev-

eryone says, "Well, yeah, but will they still be here in a month?" And the answer was: Yeah! Now there are more women who are in this, and more people who are turning it into action, not just a protest. You're seeing all over the internet: You don't like what's happening? Get out there and run for office! If you don't wanna run, find someone who does wanna run and go help 'em. Go volunteer! Go knock on doors. Be a campaign manager. And that's what happened. And then we had the wins in Virginia in 2017, and rolled into 2018. Women have changed the political landscape. In Nevada, to see a women-majority state Legislature. And women [Cont. on 97]

In the 2010s, genres merged and melded, pop felt more global and more intimate, and the biggest superstars were the most ambitious rule breakers

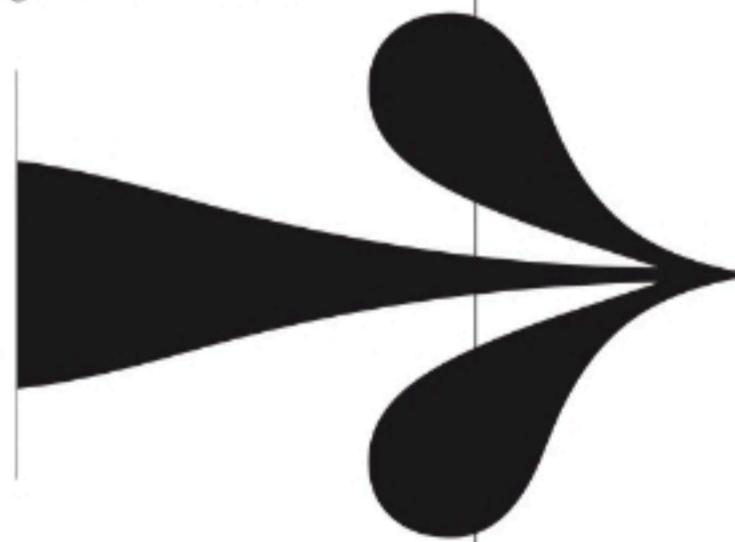
# The Best Albums of the Decade

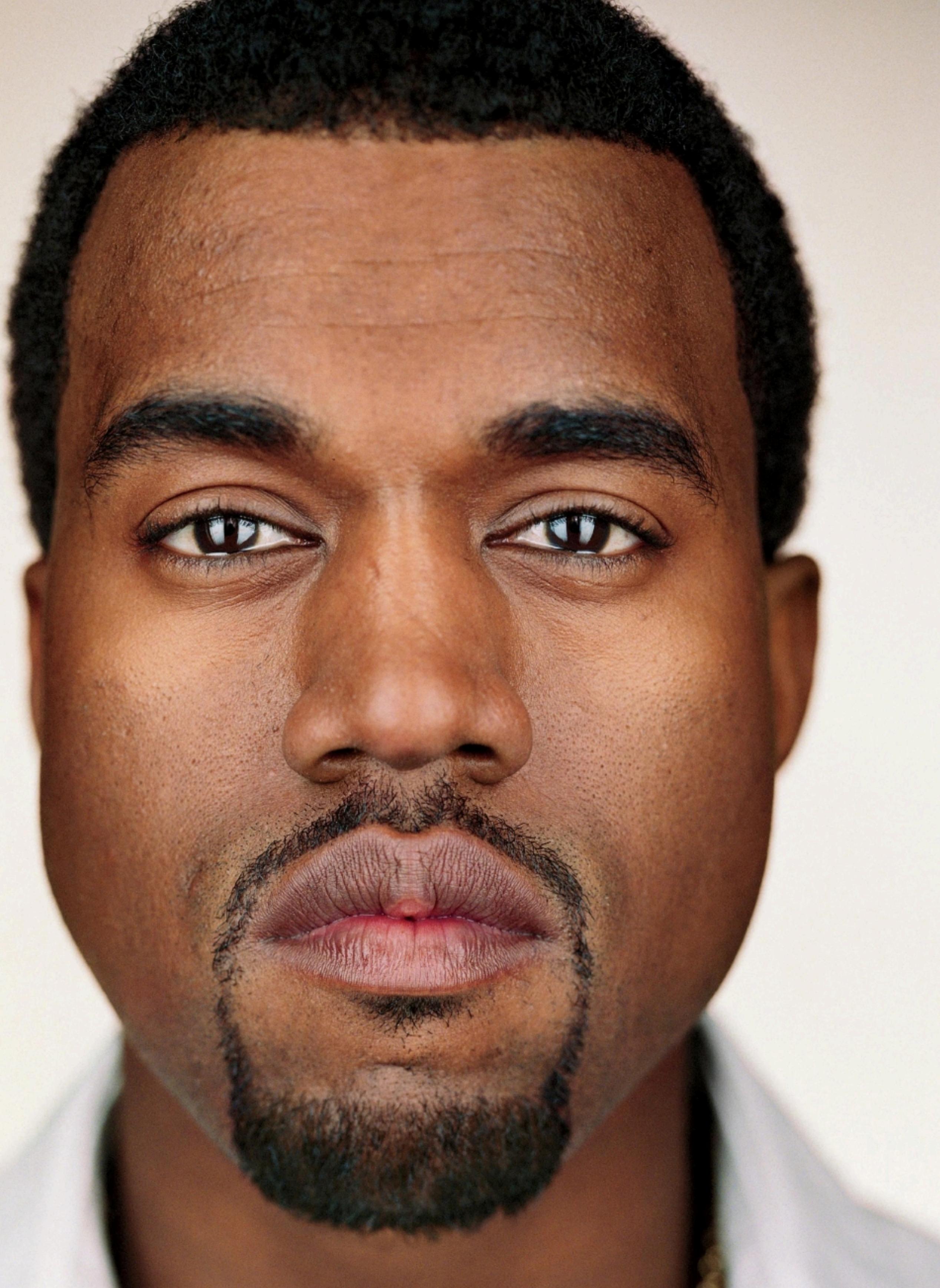
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## My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy

*Kanye West* 2010

**FORGET, IF YOU CAN, THE RED HAT, THE OUTRAGEOUS**  
tweets, the overpriced sweatpants. (You've maybe already forgotten the gospel record he put out two months ago.) Remember, instead, the gravity-defying artistic leap that Kanye pulled off with his fifth LP. Stung by the ferocious backlash to his 2009 VMAs meltdown — a moment that, quaintly in retrospect, seemed like rock bottom for his public image — he hid out in Hawaii and emerged with the ultimate





# The Best Albums of the Decade

case for his genius/jerk-off duality. The secret sessions at Avex Honolulu Studios saw Nicki Minaj, Rick Ross, Justin Vernon, and others turning in career-best performances under the guidance of Kanye's absurd yet effective house rules ("No hipster hats" ... "Just shut the fuck up sometimes"). Presiding over it all was the greatest producer of his generation, pulling from 40-plus years of popular music to spin his symphony of wounded pride, from the lush falsetto soul of "Devil in a New Dress" to the heavy-metal thunder of "Hell of a Life."

And while he memorably heaped contempt on racist laws and the *South Park* writers' room, Kanye saved the most bitter shots on *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* for himself ("Blame Game," "Runaway"). Under all the bluster, this is a concept album about his own inability to stop breaking America's heart. Nearly a decade later, it still hurts.

## 2. Lemonade

*Beyoncé* 2016

"WHO THE FUCKS do you think I is?" Beyoncé asked on her monumental sixth LP, proceeding to deliver a thunderclap statement of

marital collapse, personal triumph, radical blackness, Southern roots, and boundless musical vision. She rocks out with Jack White on "Don't Hurt Yourself," kicks gun-toting country on "Daddy Lessons," and links her story to a deeper sense of African American roots on "Formation." *Lemonade* was the only place in pop where Father John Misty and Kendrick Lamar felt equally at home, part of a collaborative conversion helmed by the queen herself, reigning supreme as the rare pop goddess who inspires as much love and empathy as shock and awe.

## 3. To Pimp a Butterfly

*Kendrick Lamar* 2015

LAMAR DEFINED hip-hop's state of the art with a sprawling 78-minute epic as influenced by Ralph Ellison and John Coltrane as it is by Biggie and Tupac. The groundbreaking rapper embraced cutting-edge beat architecture while knighting new-school jazz masters like Kamasi Washington and Robert Glasper, swerving from the free jazz of "For Free?" to the G-funk of "King Kunta." At the center of it all was Lamar's chaotic ambition and smoldering confusion, as he turned "we gon' be

alright" into a #blacklivesmatter slogan and "how much a dollar cost" into a riddle for the ages.

## 5. Blackstar

*David Bowie* 2016

BOWIE SPENT his whole career as rock's cracked actor – but he saved one of his most stunning performances for the final curtain. After years on the down-low, Bowie dropped *Blackstar* on his 69th birthday – but just two days later, the world was shocked to learn the Starman was gone. As his producer Tony Visconti said, "He made *Blackstar* for us, his parting gift." It's the testament of a man who knows he's got no time to waste – he stretches out into sci-fi space jazz, drawing inspiration from Kendrick Lamar and D'Angelo, still experimenting up to the end. Visconti summed it up: "His death was no different from his life – a work of art."

## 6. Take Care

*Drake* 2011

DRAKE HAS NEVER been more magnetically, confoundingly Drake than he was on this primal sigh of a second official album. The deliciously dark self-owned "Marvins Room" finds him duetting with the recording of a woman, while the title track pairs him with Rihanna, his verses gliding past her elegant choruses. Throughout, he makes his newly found high life seem like a luxe cocoon; "I'm rich," he said at the time. "I can do whatever I want." What he managed, somehow, was to reinvent poor-me longing as rich-boy swagger, christening a new era of male vulnerability in hip-hop.

## 7. Melodrama

*Lorde* 2016

LORDE'S debut, *Pure Heroine*, injected breathy candor into pop music, making her a teen star. With its follow-up, she took her sound to the next level. Working with producer Jack Antonoff,

# Red

*Taylor Swift* 2012

AT THE TENDER AGE of 22, Swift was already America's favorite country singer. But with *Red*, she grew up with a bona fide pop classic, proving she could do it all. As she told ROLLING STONE, "Different phases of your life have different levels of deep, traumatizing heartbreak." Swift effortlessly went outside her Nashville safety zone for the album, collaborating with Swedish pop scientist Max Martin, Kanye West collaborator Jeff Bhasker, and alt-rock songwriter Butch Walker; after Swift and Martin finished *Red*'s electro-stomping first single, "We Are Never Getting Back Together," she called it "a breakup song in the form of a parade." But everything she tried made sense. Swift hit all the levels on *Red*, showing off her mastery of Nashville twang, disco flash, guitar-hero swagger, even a dubstep drop. She set out to top Prince ("Red"), U2 ("State of Grace"), and Britney (the Martin-produced "22") – yet every moment sounds unmistakably like her. "All Too Well" remains her most majestic rock ballad: like the young Bruce Springsteen, if somebody dared him to sing about a scarf instead of a car.





# 21

Adele

2011

"IN ORDER FOR ME to feel confident with one of my songs, it has to really move me," Adele has said. "That's how I know that I've written a good song for myself – it's when I start crying." With *21*, the world cried with her. Adele's debut, *19*, established her staggering jazz-steeped vocal firepower. For its follow-up, she found co-writers who helped her create material worthy of her talent, especially Paul Epworth, who co-wrote the searing post-breakup stomper "Rolling in the Deep" and the soaring old-school/new-school R&B tune "He Won't Go." Adele communicates bracing vulnerability, even as her singing seems resolutely in charge, which created a pop blockbuster that has sold 31 million LPs worldwide and stands with forebears *Dusty in Memphis* and Amy Winehouse's *Back to Black* among the great Brit soul records of all time.

# 8

## This Is Happening

LCD Soundsystem 2010

JAMES MURPHY'S New York crew, LCD Soundsystem, defined the dance-rock boom of the 2000s. With their third LP they poignantly evoked the feeling of weary hipsters searching for meaning after the party. "Everybody's getting younger/ It's the end of an era – it's true," Murphy mourns on the opener, "Dance Yrself Clean." The hooks are sharp, the beats kinetic, and the lyrics to songs like "Drunk Girls" and "All I Want" are droll, sarcastic, and heartbroken. *This Is Happening* made the Top 10 and helped LCD fill Madison Square Garden for a legendary farewell gig.

and drawing equal influence from Kate Bush and Katy Perry, she dove into the deep end of her own heartbreak, sadness, and loneliness on wrenching ballads like "Liability" and "Writer in the Dark," and the dance-floor explosion "Green Light." "You need to be awe-struck," she said of her approach to music, summing up the sense of wonder amid turmoil that makes *Melodrama* so uniquely arresting.

### 9. Interstate Gospel

Pistol Annies 2018

THE BEST NASHVILLE supergroup of the century – comprising ace songwriters Ashley Monroe, Angaleena Presley, and Miranda Lambert – created a set of bone-deep reflections on midlife that could be hilarious (the post-divorce shuffle "Got My Name Changed Back") or heart-scarring (the grueling image of depression of "Best Years of My Life"). "We're not on a soapbox,"



# 10

Presley said. "We're doing dishes and writing songs about it." Drawing from bluegrass, honky tonk, and rootsy rock, Pistol Annies delivered a modern country classic.

### 11. Golden Hour

Kacey Musgraves 2018

MUSGRAVES changed what country singers could talk about with her live-and-let-live hit "Follow Your Arrow." But it was her 2018 LP that fully reimagined the genre. There is a celebration of psychoactive plants set to vocoder and banjo ("Oh, What a World"), a love letter to the LGBTQ community ("Rainbow"), a yeehaw filter-disco diss track ("High Horse"). *Golden Hour* took home a Grammy for Album of the Year, and even led to a gig opening for pop heartthrob Harry Styles, who said of Musgraves, "It's impossible to listen to [her] too much."

# Blonde

Frank Ocean 2016

BEFORE HIS SECOND ALBUM, Ocean was a prisoner – to the strictures of R&B, to the success of his stunning 2012 debut, *Channel Orange*, and to misconceptions about his sexuality. So he doubled down on his experimental ambitions with an enigmatic opus that pushed his art into wide-open new territory – interpolating the Beatles, referencing indie-folk artist Elliott Smith, and name-checking David Bowie and Brian Eno in the LP's extensive liner notes. *Blonde* was preceded by a series of blown release dates in the summer of 2016; when it finally arrived, it came with a zine full of sensual, summery imagery that proved a nice complement to songs like the gorgeously swooning "Pink + White," the bleary guitarscape "Ivy," and the tensely drifting chipmunk-soul lament "Nikes." Ocean's lyrics reference Trayvon Martin and Hurricane Katrina, grounding his escapist sound in the politics and pain of real life, and making *Blonde* feel like a trick mirror for our times.

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### 13. Yeezus

Kanye West 2013

JUST WHEN IT looked like Kanye the celebrity was finally threatening to devour Kanye the musician, he bounced back with his most intense, confrontational album ever. *Yeezus* was a surprise blast of industrial avant-rap, constructed with the help of producer Rick Rubin, who was brought in late in the process. As Rubin told ROLLING STONE, "I was thinking like Alan Vega and Suicide, that kind of noise-synth minimal vibe." Kanye amped the aggression, from "Black Skinhead" to "New Slaves" to the Nina Simone-Billie Holiday tribute "Blood on the Leaves." But he saved his best trick for last, with the vintage soul of "Bound 2" – his most obscenely tender love song.

### 15. Vibras

J Balvin 2018

COLOMBIAN reggaeton smoothie Balvin was all over the radio in 2018, thanks to his appearances on Cardi B's "I Like

It" and his own hit "Mi Gente," which kicks off *Vibras*, the most universal Spanish-language LP of the 2010s. Balvin's internationalist ease comes through on "Brillo," a duet with new-school flamenco singer Rosalía, while "Machika" brings Brazilian pop

queen Anitta together with Aruban singer Jeon. "My music doesn't discriminate," Balvin sings. It was a well-timed message.

### 16. Light Up Gold

Parquet Courts 2013

JUST WHAT YOU least expected from indie rock

in 2013: a nonstop manic guitar rave, from a band of merry Texas pranksters running wild in Brooklyn. Parquet Courts crammed their breakthrough album, *Light Up Gold*, full of relentless guitars and shroom poetry, daring all other bands to try a little

harder. It inaugurated a new retro-Nineties golden age. "Stoned and Starving" became a millennial anti-anthem, a five-minute power drone about the search for junk food: "I was debating Swedish Fish/Roasted peanuts, or licorice." Pure poetry.

### 17. Acid Rap

Chance the Rapper 2013

CHICAGO UPSTART Chance the Rapper's second release – a free mixtape that has been downloaded 1.7 million times – introduced a turbulently psychedelic new sound and voice that seemed hopeful even when he was rapping, "I know you scared/You should ask us if we scared too." At a time when Chicago was being cast in the media as an endless war zone, Chance's frenetic ebullience inspired against-the-odds optimism.

### 18. So Beautiful or So What

Paul Simon 2011

SIMON'S MOST satisfying set in decades was made by going back to basics, instead of building songs around beats as he had on recent LPs. "The stimuli was a guitar in my lap," he said. But his 12th solo album also engaged the

# Brothers

The Black Keys 2010

BEFORE THEY RECORDED their sixth album, the Black Keys were hardly in the safest creative space: The Ohio garage duo had drifted apart personally, and drummer Patrick Carney had just gone through a crippling divorce. "Pat was fried from his divorce," said singer-guitarist Dan Auerbach. "When he heard the lyrics to 'Next Girl,' he was just so stoked. The rest of the session, it was smooth sailing." *Brothers* went on to become their most cathartic record, with lyrics touching on marital discord and hope for the future, set to beautifully smudgy R&B, soul, and low-fi funk. "Tighten Up," the Danger Mouse-produced slice of staccato bump and grind, even became the band's pop-radio breakthrough.

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present, sampling blues and gospel as Simon's lyrics invoked a CAT scan, a kid on triple deployment in Iraq, Jay-Z on a billboard, and a Vietnam vet working in a carwash while trying to write a film script. Even when his subject matter is otherworldly (the African-flavored "The Afterlife"), the storytelling feels unmistakably real.

## 19. 1989

*Taylor Swift* 2014

ON THE CUSP of turning 25, Swift took the biggest risk of her career, abandoning country to follow the "blatant pop music" she'd tried on *Red* into a full-scale dance-floor rebirth. *1989* channeled the music of her birth decade and created a synth-pop fantasia, experimenting musically and lyrically on songs like the cheeky "Blank Space" and the atmospheric romance of "Wildest Dreams," indulging an electro introspection that influenced Lorde and Carly Rae Jepsen, among many others.

## 20. A Seat at the Table

*Solange* 2016

SOLANGE KNOWLES spent years fitting herself into different musical boxes. But with *A Seat at the Table*, she found the right mix of modern R&B and Seventies-steeped soul, and emerged as a poet laureate of the 21st-century black-female experience, articulating frustrations with racial stereotypes ("Mad") and fetishes ("Don't Touch My Hair"), while honoring her roots by writing the album in her family's Louisiana hometown. "I wanted to reclaim that space," she said. Mission accomplished.

## 21. Sometimes I Sit and Think, and Sometimes I Just Sit

*Courtney Barnett* 2015

THE SHARPEST indie-rock singer-songwriter of her generation, Barnett packed her debut with vivid vi-

gnettes that leverage small moments and vague malaise into big revelations. "The album is...a year of emotions," she said. "Twelve months of fucking every day, up, down, up, down." The highlight is "Depreston," in which a failed house-hunting trip leads to heartbreak observations on aging, loss, and loneliness.

## 22. A Moon Shaped Pool

*Radiohead* 2016

RADIOHEAD kept a low profile for much of the decade – all the better to floor us when they returned after a five-year gap with this deep, dark dream of an album. While it's book-

# Anti

*Rihanna* 2017

RIHANNA BEGAN this century as the queen of bangers, unloosing a string of unstoppable hits like "Umbrella," "S&M," and "We Found Love," while making compact R&B albums at an equally impressive clip. With *Anti*, one of pop's most successful singles artists mastered album-oriented expression and made the best music of her career. "I was determined not to settle for what everybody thought this should be, or when they thought it should come, or how," she said. "I stuck to it until I felt something again!" The process took nearly three years, and included contributions from Timbaland, DJ Mustard, The Weeknd, and many others. Rihanna got psychedelic with a cover of a song by Aussie space-pop band Tame Impala, and referenced Florence + the Machine. More impressive was the way she made her sonic wanderlust feel urgent, sculpting some of her most immediate songs, like the vulnerable, shimmering "Kiss It Better" and the Drake duet "Work," and how she capped off the album with a smoldering run of modern torch ballads. On "James Joint," she tells us that she'd "rather be/Smoking weed/ Whenever we breathe/Every time you kiss me." On *Anti*, freeing her mind opened up a window to a new kind of soul.

## SO, HOW WAS YOUR DECADE?

**LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA**

## The 'Hamilton' Creator on Musical Surprises



**My favorite album of the 2010s was:** Beyoncé's 4, just because it has one of my favorite songs of all time, "Countdown." I think the surprise drop for her self-titled album was the most innovative thing about the 2010s – it changed the way we exist. **My favorite song of the**

**2010s was:** I will refer you to "Countdown." **The artist who had the best decade was:** Donald Glover. He was being recognized for different talents in different things, all at the same time. **The craziest thing that happened to me in the 2010s was:** Honestly, it's the *Hamilton* wave that keeps cresting. I thought we'd do well with school groups [and] maybe run one or two years. Everything else has been gravy.

ended by two lost gems from the Nineties (the twitchy "Burn the Witch" and the gentle "True Love Waits"), the real triumph of *A Moon Shaped Pool* is everything in between, with Jonny Greenwood's gorgeous orchestration and Thom Yorke's vulnerable songwriting pushing the band to new heights of emotional realness.

## 23. Body Talk

*Robyn* 2010

ROBYN WAS an international star at 15, but it took 15 more years to make her first full-length masterpiece. *Body Talk* proved there may be no artist better at marrying modern pop science with soulful club jams, harnessing precisely calibrated hook fests to ego-dissolving dance-floor bliss. The heart-on-sleeve scenario of "Dancing on My Own" is the paradigm, while "Hang With Me" is Euro-disco with achingly real emotions, and the robo-rap showcase "Fembot" brings out a feminist subtext in her music that parallels Janelle Monáe's cyber soul.

## 24. Modern Vampires of the City

*Vampire Weekend* 2013

AFTER FORMING at Columbia University, the boat-shoe-wearing blog-loved indie-pop crew toned down the sunny globe-trotting guitars of their 2008 debut and stared down quarter-life crisis with a broodingly lovely album of reflections on morality, God, uncertainty, and romantic decay; fittingly, they debuted *Modern Vampire's* first single, "Unbelievers," dressed as skeletons on late-night TV just days after Hurricane Sandy shut down New York, and on songs like "Diane Young" and "Hannah Hunt," Ezra Koenig turns the search for faint glints of redemption in his own emotional wreckage into a drama of Dylan-esque grandeur.



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# The Best Albums of the Decade

## 26. Beyoncé

*Beyoncé* 2013

RECORDED in a secrecy that made the Manhattan Project look like a chill hang, Beyoncé's self-titled fifth album was the mother of all surprise releases when it hit in 2013 – an especially insane feat since *Beyoncé* came with a blockbuster visual album as well. The music inside was her most ambitious up to that point, especially on mountainous sex sagas like "Drunk in Love," an epic duet with Jay-Z, and the sumptuous, string-bathed "Rocket," which opens with the queen intoning, "Let me sit this ass on you." It was the sound of the glossiest star in the world chasing her musical and physical urges in any direction that felt true.

## 27. Damn.

*Kendrick Lamar* 2017

AFTER THE sprawl of *To Pimp a Butterfly*, with its widescreen jazz-rap portrait of the nation, Lamar changed gears completely. *Damn.* was his most unabashed rap banger to date, rocking hard from start to finish, scoring his first Number One hit with "Humble." Despite guests from Bono to Rihanna, Lamar kept the flow fast and furious as he raged about "the feelin' of an apocalypse happenin'." As he explained, "The best entertainers have to have the most wickedest sense of humor, to be able to take pain and change it into laughter."

## 28. Southeastern

*Jason Isbell* 2013

AFTER THEN-GIRLFRIEND, fiddle-player-songwriter Amanda Shires, helped get him to quit drinking and go into rehab, alt-country singer-songwriter Isbell made this focused album, a stripped-down, often reflectively quiet collection of unsparing honesty and vivid detail. With Shires adding harmonies, he addressed his demons on "Cover Me Up," and with "Elephant," he authored



# When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?

**Billie Eilish** 2019

**EVERYONE KNOWS** that pop was big business in the 2010s, but that didn't stop 18-year-old Eilish from making her insanely catchy blockbuster debut the DIY way. Writing and recording with her brother at their childhood home in L.A.'s Highland Park (sometimes singing her vocals while slouched in bed), Eilish reinvented punk rebellion for the extremely online generation, from the gleeful button-pushing of "Bad Guy" to the goth drama of "My Strange Addiction," to the straight-edge eye roll of "Xanny." As her dad explained to ROLLING STONE, Eilish "has no tolerance for people she's not interested in and doesn't give a shit whether you like her or not." That uncompromising spirit came through in her distractedly mumbled vocals, sinister delivery, and a lyrical sensibility inspired by horror movies like *Alien* and *The Babadook*. Despite (or perhaps because of) its total disinterest in mainstream pop formula, the LP touched a nerve no one could have expected; the week *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* came out, Eilish had 14 songs in the Top 100, and when it debuted at the top of the charts in the spring of 2019, she became the first artist born in the 21st century to have a Number One album.

a penetrating song about watching a loved one die of cancer, singing "One thing that's real clear to me/ No one dies with dignity," taking on tragedy with plain-spoken truth.

## 29. Teens of Denial

*Car Seat Headrest* 2016

INDIE-ROCK prodigy Will Toledo got his start just out of high school, writing songs in his parents' house or, sometimes, alone in their car, and putting the results on the internet. By his 10th LP, *Teens of Denial*, he had a real band and total mastery of chaotic guitar poetry à la Pavement, haymaker hooks à la Guided by Voices, and gut-check unburdening à la Liz Phair. "I'm so sick of/Fill in the blank," he sings on the album's opening anthem, but there is as much empathy as apathy on highlights like the crushing six-minute centerpiece "Drunk Drivers/Killer Whales."

## 30. Thank U, Next

*Ariana Grande* 2019

After dealing with a series of personal traumas – a terrorist attack at her Manchester concert, the death of ex-boyfriend Mac Miller, and her breakup with Pete Davidson – Grande channeled her feelings into the stellar *Thank U, Next*. "NASA" swirled into space, while "Ghostin'" stared tragedy in the face, and the title track was a graceful break-up ballad for the ages. The LP was part of a creative surge for Grande, her second album in less than six months. "I just want to fucking talk to my fans, and sing, and write music and drop it," she said.

## 32. Norman Fucking Rockwell!

*Lana Del Rey* 2019

DEL REY MADE captivating noir pop throughout the 2010s. For *Norman Fucking Rockwell!*, she immersed herself in L.A. singer-songwriters, from classic Laurel Canyon albums to recent work by her friend Father John Misty. "I just feel

# Be the Cowboy

**Mitski** 2018

**I MISS SEEING** that swaggering cowboy on stage," Mitski Miyawaki told ROLLING STONE, explaining the title of her stellar fifth album. "I miss being mesmerized by that, and I thought, 'Well, I should just be that cowboy that I want to see onstage.' I'm just going to be the thing that mesmerizes me." On *Be the Cowboy*, the then-27-year-old singer-guitarist was a new kind of indie-rock hero – a self-determined young woman crafting perfectly sculpted, powerhouse songs that fuse goth romanticism, noisy guitar tumult, folk earnestness, and arty pop savvy, while channeling her twentysomething ennui into indelible lyrics like "Nobody fucks me like . . . me." Miyawaki, who lived in 13 different countries before her family settled in the United States, played in a metal band after college, but eventually found her musical voice writing songs like the elegantly sludgy, starkly unburdening "Your Best American Girl," a breakout indie hit from her 2016 LP, *Puberty 2*. Massive media buzz helped lead to a spot opening arena dates on Lorde's *Melodrama* tour. With *Be the Cowboy*, Mitski made her inner turmoil feel universal, from the cathedral-size swoon of "Pink in the Night" to "Me and My Husband," a trenchant marriage parody set to Beatlesque piano chords. "I don't really see the point in putting together a bunch of words for the sake of my own expression," she said. "I'm interested in having someone understand me."



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# Invasion of Privacy

**Cardi B** 2018

**CARDI B DIDN'T NEED** to make music to become a star. She was already a huge social media presence and a hilarious reality-TV personality. But she recorded one of the most entertaining hip-hop albums of our era anyway, radiating brash old-school Bronx charisma as she spit unforgettable lines like "I started speaking my mind and tripled my views/ Real bitch, only thing fake is the boobs." Cardi did a bloody-shoed stomp up the charts with the dragon-breathed "Bodak Yellow," declared herself "like Big Pop mixed with Tupac" on the Chance the Rapper-assisted "Best Life," and convened a cross-cultural convo with Latin pop stars Bad Bunny and J Balvin on the surprise summer smash "I Like It." As she told ROLLING STONE, "I used to tell myself that I will always be myself." On *Invasion of Privacy*, she's the only Cardi the world will ever need.

such a connection to that singer-songwriter world," she said. The result was a modern masterpiece of doomily romantic California ache. Her torpid Seventies majesty seemed to stretch out endlessly, whether Del Rey was offering a passing prayer for the late Dennis Wilson, singing about dancing to the Eagles in Malibu, or losing herself in the fading-sunset glow of "Venice Bitch" and "Mariners Apartment Complex."

## 35. Black Messiah

**D'Angelo** 2014

**NEO-SOUL ARCHITECT** D'Angelo's first album in 14 years was an immaculately layered, relentlessly funky, and politically urgent statement, reflecting a concern for detail that often seemed missing in the straight-to-streaming era. You can hear echoes of ragtime and jazz, Parliament, and Prince as D'Angelo fills each song with his beguiling, twistingly intricate multipart harmonies. Released in part as a response to a jury's failure to indict a Ferguson, Missouri, cop for the shooting death of Michael Brown, *Black Messiah* was a comeback no one expected that felt right on time – and one of the most welcome returns of the decade.

## 36. Dark Matter

**Randy Newman** 2017

**AMERICAN MUSIC'S** greatest comic ironist released only one album in the 2010s, but it was a gem, perhaps Newman's most mordant assessment yet of his fellow man. *Dark Matter* catalogs historical calamities: science on trial in "The Great Debate," the Cuban Missile Crisis on the brink in "Brothers," and fascism on Broadway in the sardonically smiley "Putin." And when he pares back his sweeping classic-American sound for somber family tragedies like "Wandering Boy" and "Lost Without You," the darkness really hits home.

# The Best Albums of the Decade

## 37. Channel Orange

Frank Ocean 2012

WHEN OCEAN BRAGS about his "great gray matter" on *Channel Orange*, it is truth in advertising. Lush and mysterious, evoking the downcast smolder of Seventies Sly Stone and the inner visions of Stevie Wonder, the moody soul romantic's first official release is a gorgeously bleary midnight ride into an L.A. where unemployed dudes live off their stripper girlfriends and cab drivers double as shrinks for love-lorn back-seat confessors. Ocean's bold vision helped transform R&B into a more wide-open place for the rest of the decade.

## 38. A Sailor's Guide to Earth

Sturgill Simpson 2016

HAILED A SAVIOR of "real" country music after his second album, 2014's *Metamodern Sounds in Country Music*, Simpson did everything he could to defy that notion on *A Sailor's Guide to Earth*, creating a love letter to his son influenced by Marvin Gaye that was more like a psychedelic-soul song cycle than a Nashville outlier. The album is full of surprises, including Simpson's endearing re-imagining of Nirvana's "In Bloom." And just to prove he hadn't left his roots totally behind, he included "Call to Arms," an anti-war anthem worthy of the deepest outlaw tradition.

## 39. El Mal Querer

Rosalía 2018

NO ARTIST in the 2010s brought together the ancient and the modern as seamlessly as Spanish singer Rosalía did on her magic trick of a second LP, which uses centuries-old Andalusian flamenco as a taking-off point for a modern pop adventure. Rosalía delivers smoldering lyrics about rapture and

## Ctrl

SZA 2017

R&B SINGERS IN the 2010s often seemed to hide their voices behind walls of reverb and booming trap beats. SZA broke that mold on her self-assured debut. "I had to just say what was on my mind," she told ROLLING STONE. "I decided to take down the reverb and be in the forefront." She created *Ctrl* with a small team of producers, who holed up in an L.A. studio listening to Brazilian jazz, Nineties hip-hop, and Nirvana for inspiration. The result is a winningly candid breakthrough ("Let me tell you a secret: I've been secretly banging your homeboy," she sings on "Supermodel"), with clean hooks that are easy to shout along to and several undeniable hits. "I think [musical] clutter comes from nerves," SZA explained. "It doesn't come from choice."



jealousy over the subtle dance-floor shudder of "Pienso en Tu Mirá," guided along by a festival-ready electronic bass, and "Bagdad," which riffs beautifully on Justin Timberlake's 2000s touchstone "Cry Me a River."

## 41. Coloring Book

Chance the Rapper 2016

AFTER KIDS told him they were inspired by his popular mixtape, *Acid Rap*, to drop LSD, Chance reflected on "the responsibility of being a popular artist," and grounded his next release in gospel as he opened up about life issues like clean living and raising a family (aptly seconded by the Chicago Children's Choir on "All We Got"). The mood shifts from jubilant ("No Problem") to defiantly woozy ("Mixtape"). Millions took heart, and *Coloring Book* became the first streaming-only album to both chart on the *Billboard* 200 and win a Grammy Award.

## 43. Tempest

Bob Dylan 2012

DYLAN TOLD "ROLLING STONE" his 35th studio album had been "worked out in rehearsals... during soundchecks." Yet there is nothing casual about his only collection of original material this decade. Songs like "Pay in Blood" and "Tin Angel" are killer displays of late-career firepower, while the music summons jump blues, Western swing, and British folk ballads. And seven years later, lines like "This is hard country to stay alive in/Blades are everywhere, and they're breaking my skin" cut even deeper than when he first sang them.

## 44. Days Are Gone

Haim 2013

"WHEN WE STARTED playing... we didn't know people in any scene," Alana Haim told ROLLING STONE. That sense of freshness and pure pop innocence came through in the L.A. trio's unshakably catchy songs. The three sisters of Haim



## Platinum

Miranda Lambert 2014

LAMBERT HAD as good a decade as almost any other artist alive, and this nearly immaculate set is so catchy, confident, and wide-ranging that it's almost unfair to other Nashville stars. Lambert had just turned 30, and gone were the gun-toting revenge songs that had partly defined her work. "I'm not just burning houses down anymore," she told ROLLING STONE. "I have more to sing about." She veers from tender meditations on fame to cheeky celebrations of her hair color (the title track, which turns "What doesn't kill you, only makes you blonder" into an extremely sticky melody) to faux-vaudeville and Western swing. Every song is perfectly constructed but feels like it is broadcast from her soul – none more so than "Bathroom Sink," a portrait of self-doubt, written by Lambert alone, that grows from acoustic sketch to raging rocker, the sound of a world-beater willing to show her vulnerabilities.

retro-fit fluttery Nineties R&B, synth-y Eighties pop rock, and breezy Southern California soft rock, leavening tunes like "Falling" and "Don't Save Me" with a seemingly innate sense of melodic craft. Every song on *Days Are Gone* bristles with bright hooks and skittery percussive energy; the peak moment of cocaine-crisp L.A. gold is "The Wire," which reimagines the Eagles' "Heartache Tonight" as if Fleetwood Mac had been in the studio to help out on harmonies.

#### 46. Wrecking Ball

*Bruce Springsteen* 2012

AMERICA WAS crawling out of the Great Recession in 2012, but Springsteen still had business to settle: "The blood on our hands will come back on us twice," he sings, running out the money changers over a hip-hop/gospel beat on "Rocky Ground." *Wrecking Ball* was his most savagely despondent LP in years, surveying our democracy in chains on the ballad "Shackled and Drawn," while still praying for a shared language of love and support on "We Take Care of Our Own." "I've written about this stuff for...30 years," he told Jon Stewart in a ROLLING STONE interview. *Wrecking Ball* shows how vital his voice remains.

#### 47. 22, a Million

*Bon Iver* 2016

"IT USED TO BE just a G chord on a guitar for many years," Justin Vernon said about the dramatic sonic evolution on Bon Iver's gorgeously glitchy third album. "This time we went looking for different kinds of sparks." With its dense layers of synths, processed samples, Auto-Tuned vocals, and fluttering horns, *22, a Million* was both a myth-busting creative rebirth for Vernon and a firm farewell to the wave of sad-sack folk-strumming that acts like Bon Iver, Fleet Foxes, and Iron and Wine had crystallized at



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#### Hamilton (Original Broadway Cast Recording)

2015

THE RECORDING OF an absurdly unlikely hip-hop musical about Founding Father Alexander Hamilton transformed how America thinks about musical theater, Broadway, and itself. Creator Lin-Manuel Miranda combines rap, R&B, and show tunes with absolute authority, quoting Biggie, Eminem, and Rodgers and Hammerstein, entering its most indelible lines ("I'm not throwing away my shot!" "Who tells your story?") into the national vernacular, while inspiring endorsement from Obama and the dumb fury of Trump.

the dawn of the decade. "Say nothing of my fable, no," Vernon sings. "What on Earth is left to come."

#### 48. You Want It Darker

*Leonard Cohen* 2016

CONFINED TO his Los Angeles home for health reasons, Cohen recorded lyrics his son, Adam, later produced into finished tracks to create the 82-year-old torch poet's rumbling prayer of a final album. "This particular predicament is filled with many fewer distractions than other times in my life, and actually enables me to work with a little more concentration and continuity," Cohen noted.

#### SO, HOW WAS YOUR DECADE?

LINDSEY JORDAN OF SNAIL MAIL

#### The 20-Year-Old Indie-Rock Prodigy on Bon Iver and Boof



My favorite album of the 2010s was: The self-titled 1975 album. The artist who had the best decade was: Frank Ocean. He just did. The craziest thing that happened to you in the past 10 years was: Touring in Asia and having fans in Jakarta. Selling out shows in places

where I just, like, would never have been able to travel to before, and having people sing the words back. The TV show I couldn't stop watching was: *Euphoria*. The best slang term of the decade was: Calling something that's ugly or bad "boof." My most surprising encounter with a fellow artist was: Justin Vernon. I've been listening to Bon Iver since I was, like, 13. The most "2010s" thing of the 2010s was: Kanye and Donald Trump. That shit was crazy.

Equally droll – and never morbid – the songs address loss and relationship travails over beautifully minimal waltzes, with Cohen's coal-mine-deep voice seeming to rumble into the eternal. His words are as powerful as his vocals. "My lost was saying found/My don't was saying do," he offers, chasing the dark truth right up to the end.

#### 49. Watch the Throne

*Jay-Z and Kanye West* 2011

A DECADE AFTER Kanye proved himself as an elite producer on Jay-Z's *The Blueprint*, modern rap's greatest frenemies reunited for this gold-plated monument to their own imperious cool. "If we were gonna do it, we were gonna do it together," Jay said, explaining their insistence on in-person sessions in New York, Paris, Los Angeles, and Bath, England. "No mailing it in." Their tag-team act on "Otis" and "N---s in Paris" is as purely delightful as rap got in the 2010s, but what makes *Watch the Throne* a highlight of both their catalogs are the glimpses of spiritual and political turmoil on "Murder to Excellence," "New Day," and "No Church in the Wild."

#### 50. Emotion

*Carly Rae Jepsen* 2015

HUNGRY TO PROVE she was more than the one-hit wonder of "Call Me Maybe," the Canadian singer worked with indie co-producers like ex-Vampire Weekend member Rostam Batmanglij and Blood Orange's Devonté Hynes, as well as old hands like Swedish song doctor Max Martin, to make her own flavor of Madonna-steeped synth-pop. "[I'm] a woman who is very fascinated by the subject of love," she said, "who loves nothing more than creating music about it." The hook overload is intoxicating, and Jepsen's emo passion feels sweet and self-aware in a way you can't help but get behind.

From Cardi to Kacey to Drake to Mitski, it was a decade shaped by new-look rock heroes, country rebels, dance-floor confessors, and reflective rap gods

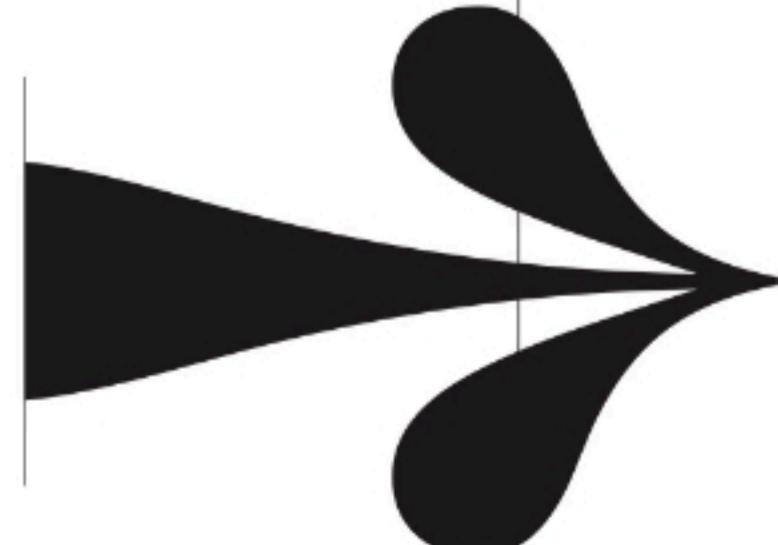
# The Best Songs of the Decade

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## Dancing on My Own

*Robyn* 2010

"I'M RIGHT OVER HERE, WHY CAN'T YOU see me?" Robyn might as well have been singing to U.S. pop audiences in the 2000s, who mostly ignored her as she spent years refining her bright, fizzy synth-pop sound to perfection. Then came "Dancing on My Own," the killer single that elevated her to something approaching voice-of-a-generation status among America's burned-out youth. Written and produced with fellow Swedish ace Patrik Berger, it's a relatable hit of heartbreak at the club with a chaser of empowering uplift — exactly the disco anthem we needed in the long hangover of the financial crisis. Robyn was no torch diva, but she sang the hell out of this one, her warm vocals pushing against the precision-tuned track. "Dancing on My Own" just kept building as the 2010s went on, soundtracking a memorable scene in HBO's *Girls* and countless karaoke nights. "All the big pop acts that I've been into over the years — whether it's ABBA or Prince — managed to combine amazing melodies and honest human emotion," Robyn said. "But coming out of the super-super-commercial pop industry in the Nineties, maybe people forgot about the fact that pop music can do both of those things."





# The Best Songs of the Decade

## 3. Rolling in the Deep

Adele 2011

FRESHLY HURT by the end of her relationship with an older photographer, then-21-year-old Adele walked into producer Paul Epworth's northwest London studio and made the greatest breakup song of the 2010s. "I never get angry, but I was ready to murder," she later recalled. "It's me saying, 'Get the fuck out of my house' instead of me begging him to come back." You can hear it in her voice, an all-time performance whose roaring fury is downright biblical. "Rolling in the Deep" was a global chart-topper that made Adele a superstar and proved that classic soul could still conquer the world. "Carole King is the last person [before Adele] who wrote the kind of lyrics women immediately could relate to," marveled Aretha Franklin. "I love to hear a schoolgirl on the school bus yellin' 'We coulda had it all!'"

## 5. All Too Well

Taylor Swift 2012

THE DEVASTATING centerpiece of *Red* is about a relationship that's long over, except in Swift's memory – and in her ex's dresser, where he keeps a borrowed scarf he can't bring himself to return. The disappointment in her voice is still fresh as she thinks about the sweet-talking guy who turned out to be "so casually cruel in the name of being honest." (She freestyled that line while soundchecking for a concert: "I was just playing these chords over and over onstage, and my band joined in and I went on a rant.") Tabloids quickly identified the scarf thief as Jake Gyllenhaal, but the brilliance of "All Too Well" is in how it makes you feel like you were right there with her, too.

## 6. Runaway

Kanye West 2010

"IT'S LIKE A MAN'S anthem," West told *Access Hollywood*, "but it's a



## Formation

Beyoncé 2016

NONE OF BEYONCÉ'S many hits embodied her unrivaled cultural power in the 2010s better than "Formation," a stylish song-of-myself flex that was also a rallying cry for millions. Celebrating her roots in Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas, she claimed the black experience in the Deep South as a source of pride; with a single horny couplet, she forever changed the meaning of date night at Red Lobster. The genius of "Formation" – especially taken in conjunction with the striking imagery of its music video and Super Bowl performance – is in its bold tangling of the personal and the political, wrapping the tragedy of Katrina in the glamour of a Givenchy gown and daring you to call it a contradiction. "I'm an artist," she said, knowing some had missed the point, "and I think the most powerful art is usually misunderstood."

woman's anthem. Like, 'Let's have a toast with a douchebag!' Speculated to be a mea culpa for his dust-up with Taylor Swift at the 2009 VMAs, "Runaway" mixes self-indictment, self-awareness,

and self-obsession into a nine-minute epic that's sad, frightening, and almost incomprehensible in its scarred beauty – from its slasher string intro to its vocoder-smeared closing. "I need more douchebag,"

West screamed at guest rapper Pusha T during the song's recording. The result is peak Old Kanye.

## 7. Thank U, Next

Ariana Grande 2019

WHEN GRANDE split up with SNL's Pete Davidson after a very public whirlwind romance, the obvious thing to do was to drop a celebrity diss track. Instead, she released one of the most generous breakup songs of all time – an ode to lessons learned and self-love set to a fluttery track that suggests a mind at peace already moving on to new discovery. "Even almost got married/And for Pete, I'm so thankful," she sings. Grande wrote several versions of the song, including one where she and Davidson get married: "Then we broke up again, so we ended up going with that verse," she said.

## 9. I Like It

Cardi B feat. Bad Bunny and J Balvin 2018

NOBODY EVER accused Cardi B of thinking small. "I Like It" is her hugely expansive vision of hip-hop as a multicultural, worldwide block party. Cardi brings in Puerto Rican rapper Bad Bunny and Colombian reggaeton

# Alright

Kendrick Lamar 2015

"AS A KID FROM COMPTON you can get all the success in the world and still question your worth," Lamar told ROLLING STONE in 2015. In the most lasting single from his era-defining masterpiece *To Pimp a Butterfly*, he dramatizes that inner conflict in vivid, immediate terms. "Alls my life, I had to fight," he begins, quoting Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* to evoke generations of inherited trauma. By the time Pharrell's buoyant production kicks in, Lamar has found reason to believe: "If God got us, then we gon' be alright." In the context of the album's complex emotional journey, it's a moment of cautious optimism. Once "Alright" reached the world, it became something more: an anthem for a new civil-rights movement, its chorus chanted at countless Black Lives Matter protests across America.

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## 8

# Follow Your Arrow

Kacey Musgraves 2013

**THE TEXAS COWGIRL** made her big entrance with "Follow Your Arrow," and right from the git-go, she had her own style. Over guitar twang, the then-25-year-old Musgraves serves up some homespun advice: "Make lots of noise/Kiss lots of boys/Or kiss lots of girls if that's something you're into." Originally written as a poem for a friend who was taking a trip overseas, the song whipped up a fair amount of controversy, but Musgraves refused to back down. "Even if they don't agree with the girls-kissing-girls thing, or even the drug reference," Musgraves said, "I would hope that they would agree that no matter what, we all should be able to love who we want to love and live how we want to live." She's been following her arrow ever since.



star Balvin to shine on her trap groove, riding a sample from the 1967 boogaloo classic "I Like It Like That." All her guests rise to the occasion – who else but Balvin would compare himself to Lady Gaga and Jimmy Snuka in the same verse? But Cardi runs shit like cardio, turning "I Like It" into a Number One smash.

## 10. Hotline Bling

Drake 2015

DRAKE (RIGHTFULLY) slammed the Grammys for awarding this not-very-rappy song Best Rap Song and Best Rap/Sung Performance, wondering if they picked those categories just "because I'm black." But in

their defense, it's a pretty great little jam. Along with being inescapably catchy (Caribbean in feel but powered by a 1970s soul sample), "Hotline Bling" was also a marvel of the internet, inspiring countless covers and memes of its video to mark a new era in Top 40 democracy.

## 11. Royals

Lorde 2013

INSPIRED BY a picture of Kansas City Royals slugger George Brett, and Jay-Z and Kanye West's *Watch the Throne*, a 15-year-old New Zealander, Ella Marija Lani Yelich-O'Connor, penned a softly swaggering ode to her own fantasies of greatness (and the mixed

feelings they engender) that becomes a global smash. "It was just that word," she said of the title. "It's really cool." Pensive but proud, "Royals" is hushed low-fi pop-rap, with Lorde mumbling her lines like a kid dreaming up poetry while distractedly staring at her phone. It is a classic dispatch from teenage wasteland rendered in a whole new language of millennial malaise.

## 12. Old Town Road

Lil Nas X 2019

LIL NAS X – a 19-year-old peddler of Twitter memes deploying a \$30 web-sourced beat – made history topping the Hot 100 for a record 19 weeks with his two-minute country-hip-hop masterpiece. "I got bored one day and made this song," Nas told ROLLING STONE of "Old Town Road," a moment of pop disruption that cheekily appropriates cowboy tropes, samples a Nine Inch Nails track, and features Billy Ray Cyrus, Young Thug, and child country star Mason Ramsey, among others, on various remixes, tapping a bottomless well of American cross-racial conversation. As Nas said, "Wow, it's rock, country, hip-hop, all in the same room." Yeehaw!

## 13. Your Best American Girl

Mitski 2016

THE INDIE-ROCK anthem of the decade didn't come from a record-geek college-boy band. It was by a 25-year-old Japanese American woman singing "Your mother wouldn't approve of how my mother raised me" over My Bloody Valentine guitar swells. "I didn't grow up in the U.S.," Mitski Miyawaki said of the song. "It came from wanting to just fit into this very American person's life, and simply not being able to." Yet, as the shyly hulking guitars gain power and her voice pushes forward, you can feel her power past alienation toward an ecstasy of her own making.

### SO, HOW WAS YOUR DECADE?

MIRANDA LAMBERT

#### The Country Star on Taylor Swift, Pregnancy, and Spanx



**My favorite album was:** Brent Cobb's *Shine On Rainy Day*.  
**My favorite song was:** "Girl Crush," by Little Big Town.  
**The artist who had the best decade was:** Taylor Swift. **The TV show I couldn't stop streaming was:** *Godless* and *Ozark*.  
**The misstep I learned the most from was:** Rushing. Take a breath, and take it in. **The best new slang term was:** "AF." **Something cool I did that nobody noticed was:** Getting married. **The best outfit I wore this decade was:** A yellow dress with pink heels with a gold pistol attached, to the ACM Awards in Vegas. **The most "2010s" moment of the 2010s was:** The invention of Spanx leggings. **The strangest thing someone said about me in the media was:** I was pregnant, again.

# Shallow

*Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper* 2017

**GAGA BEGAN** the 2010s as music's new glam queen, but her glitter started to fade a little as she detoured into jazz and Lilith Fair country rock. "Shallow" reignited the drama she was loved for. Gaga's duet with actor Bradley Cooper, from the 2018 remake of *A Star Is Born*, built a towering moment of power-ballad glory with not much more than an acoustic guitar, their chemistry, and Gaga's sweeping vocals. "We just had an instant connection," Gaga said later of Cooper. "I felt comfortable with Bradley." Gaga wrote the song with superproducer Mark Ronson, originally thinking it might run in the closing credits of the film. Instead, it serves as a pivotal onstage triumph for Ally, the insecure singer Gaga plays in the film. As Ronson said later, "Everybody's life experience and trials and tribulations are being channeled in that song."

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## 15. Mi Gente

*J Balvin and Willy William* 2017

"THE BEAUTIFUL thing about 'Mi Gente,'" said Balvin in 2018, "is that I wrote it in Spanish with Willy William, a producer from Paris.... And it hit Number One [in the charts] around the world." Colombian reggaeton star Balvin campaigned for a borderless pop future, crooning about musical inclusion over producer William's infectiously forlorn synth-horn riff and rattling beat. "Mi Gente" was a smash even before Beyoncé swooped in to give it a remix. As Balvin noted, "It wasn't a strategy to make it bigger.... It was for the culture."

## 16. Stoned and Starving

*Parquet Courts* 2012

CAT-SITTING for a friend, Andrew Savage of Parquet Courts decided to go on the stoned bodega crawl through Ridgewood, Queens, that became the inspiration for the decade's premier indie-guitar

banger. Parquet Courts zoned out gloriously as Savage turned choosing between roasted peanuts and licorice into a rich existential riddle.

## 17. Get Lucky

*Daft Punk feat. Pharrell Williams and Nile Rodgers* 2013

THE FRENCH robots took the edge off a rough decade with this plush disco pastiche featuring funk wizard Nile Rodgers on guitar and Pharrell Williams on the mic. "I don't know if it's a disco track," Williams later hedged. "It feels a little bit more, like, post [disco]." Replacing the Seventies disco-diva wail with Williams' light falsetto helped "Get Lucky" rise like a phoenix while still feeling warm and invitingly human.

## 18. Bad and Boujee

*Migos* 2016

"WE DID IT the trap way, not the pop way," Offset told ROLLING STONE, reflecting on the unlikely rise of "Bad and Boujee" from the strip clubs of Atlanta

to the top of the charts. Nearly six minutes long and layered with inventive, acrobatic rhymes, it turned "raindrop, drop-top" into a cultural catchphrase, and made the simple act of spending too much money feel like a bold avant-garde statement.

## 19. Hold On

*Alabama Shakes* 2012

THE NEW-SCHOOL Southern blues-rock band wrote its breakout single the old-fashioned way, riffing during a club show while frontwoman Brittany Howard made up lyrics about "trying to inspire [herself] to keep working, stay positive." The elusive rawness of "Hold On" was a huge part of its appeal.

## 20. Oblivion

*Grimes* 2012

WITH SUNRISE-tinted bangs and an otherworldly soprano, Canadian eccentric Claire Boucher ushered in a new era of oddball dance pop with her 2012 LP, *Visions*, and its standout single "Oblivion," which contemplates the perils of

being a woman out after dark. She said of the song's difficult inspiration, "I was assaulted," adding, "I was just so terrified of men for a while."

## 21. Springsteen

*Eric Church* 2011

COUNTRY REBEL Church specializes in building small moments into big

ideas. With "Springsteen," he ditched fiddles and pedal steel for the chugging sound of the song's namesake and unfurled the memory of a teenage love affair that had sparked at a Springsteen show between "I'm on Fire" and "Born to Run." It's all true, up to a point. "It didn't happen with Springsteen, ironically, it happened with another artist," Church said.

## 22. Drunk in Love

*Beyoncé feat. Jay-Z* 2013

"I KIND OF FREESTYLED the verse," Beyoncé explained of this ode to morning-after memories of an all-nighter spent riding the "good-good" wood of her man's "surfboard." Her husband, Jay-Z, freestyled his part as well, unfortunately referencing Mike Tyson and Ike Turner. Yet nothing could take away the power of Beyoncé celebrating her own desire.

## 23. Despacito

*Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee feat. Justin Bieber* 2019

PUERTO RICAN pop stars Fonsi and Daddy Yankee already had a hit with their breezy collaboration "Despacito." Then Bieber hopped on the remix and the most popular mostly-in-Spanish song ever was

### SO, HOW WAS YOUR DECADE?

**QUESTLOVE**

### The Roots Drummer on Cancel Culture and LOL'ing



**The artist who had the best decade was:** Donald Glover. I enjoyed watching him make every snarky critic eat their smug shit. **My least favorite trend in music this decade was:** All the obituaries I had to write about its participants.

**The best new slang term of the decade was:** This can be really corny to answer. Probably the most telling is "LOL." Nine times out of 10 we aren't laughing when we do "LOL." **The best live show I saw in the 2010s was:** The Roots/Outkast/Lionel Richie. Lionel Richie took names and kicked ass! **The misstep I learned the most from in the 2010s was:** Cancel culture and all of its consequences is real. **Something cool I did that nobody noticed was:** Getting Jay-Z on Twitter.



# Truth Hurts

**Lizzo** 2017

"TRUTH HURTS" took a long, strange journey to become Lizzo's first Number One hit. She wrote it in 2017, inspired in part by a tweet ("I did a DNA test and found out I'm 100% that bitch") from a little-known British songwriter to whom Lizzo later gave a co-writing credit. But the song didn't become a hit until two years later, after a groundswell of popularity on Twitter and TikTok, and its appearance in the spring 2019 Netflix rom-com *Someone Great*. "That song is my life, and its words are my truth," Lizzo said. Indeed, it's the ultimate Lizzo anthem, a sassy sing-rap ode to euphoric self-love in the face of getting your heart stomped that perfectly sums up her status as a twerk-soul voice of the people. That DNA test she took? It was 100% correct.

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born. "What I heard is that he was in the club in Colombia and heard the song," Daddy Yankee said. "Justin Bieber always does a great job when it comes to interpretation."

## 25. Adorn

**Miguel** 2012

IN THE EARLY 2010S, as R&B artists chased the hip-hop and EDM zeitgeist, this California upstart showed up out of nowhere sounding like a singer from another era; Miguel exuded the style and grace of a Motown romantic on his plush debut slow jam, a song that felt sweetly old-school right down to its anachronistic-sounding title.

## 26. Mask Off

**Future** 2017

THE ATLANTA rap spaceman was one of the decade's most prolific, unpredictable artists. "Mask Off" was Future at his far-out best, over Metro Boomin's flute-loop sample. As his collaborator Kendrick Lamar put it, "He's his own genius."

## 27. Chandelier

**Sia** 2014

AN AUTHOR OF HITS by Rihanna, Beyoncé, Flo Rida, and many others, Sia had her own huge smash rewriting party-girl clichés

on "Chandelier," which she based on her own struggles with drinking. "Sometimes I'll write one that I relate to," she said. "Those are the ones I don't give away."

## 28. Archie, Marry Me

**Alvvays** 2014

"A LOT OF PEOPLE 'grow up' and get mortgages and have big dumb weddings, and this song takes the piss

out of that," Alvvays' Molly Rankin explained. By soaking the satire in sweet distortion and an achingly pretty melody, the Canadian band wound up with one of the decade's most romantic songs at the same time.

## 30. We Found Love

**Rihanna feat. Calvin Harris** 2011

CALVIN HARRIS' rave-y demo of this song floated around for months (it was rejected by Nicole Scherzinger of the Pussycat Dolls). Then Rihanna got a hold of it and turned it into an uplifting modern standard that's been crushing wedding receptions ever since. "I want each track to be as good as it can possibly be," Harris said, "and that usually means me not singing on it."

## 31. Sign of the Times

**Harry Styles** 2017

IT SURE WASN'T the traditional way to start a post-boy-band solo career. Styles could've begun life after One Direction with a

# Sorry

**Justin Bieber** 2015

"SORRY" MARKED a new maturity for the then-21-year-old Bieber, who was looking to move past his unfortunate bad-boy phase into new musical and personal territory. "Sorry" was co-written by Justin Tranter, who took pride in creating songs that "let men be allowed to be vulnerable," and produced by Skrillex, who strove to "keep it simple" with an almost elegiac beat. "It was about a girl," Bieber later said. And like so many great songs that are simply about a girl, it's coy and tender and just delicately cocky enough to give the tune a shot of big-boy energy. Bieber worried it might be a little too safe. But as Skrillex later put it, "When you listen to his lyrics, you can tell he's becoming an adult."

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# The Best Songs of the Decade

sugary pop tune. Instead, he wrote a song connecting the Seventies-glam balladry of Bowie and Queen to our own worried moment. As Styles explained to ROLLING STONE, "Sign of the Times" came from "This isn't the first time we've been in a hard time, and it's not going to be the last time."

## 32. Bodak Yellow *Cardi B* 2017

THE FLOW was borrowed from Kodak Black's "No Flockin," but the transformation of stress-mode fury into feminine glamour was pure Cardi. She wrote her rhymes on a plane, listening to a beat her producer J. White had sent her. "Every bitch that I don't like came to my head," she said. "And I pictured me slapping it to them." When she knocked Taylor Swift's "Look What You Made Me Do" from the Number One spot, Swift sent her flowers to celebrate.

## 33. Hold On, We're Going Home *Drake* 2013

IF THE DRUM pattern on top sounds like "Billie Jean," there's a reason: Drake and producer Noah "40" Shebib's humble attempt to channel their power as a "Quincy Jones-Michael Jackson production duo" and create a timeless track that could "be played at weddings in 10 years." R&B with a hip-hop mindset, "Hold On, We're Going Home" cemented Drake's place as the central hitmaker of the decade.

## 34. Bad Guy *Billie Eilish* 2019

"I DON'T WANT TO BE in the pop world," Eilish said. "I want it to be, 'What kind of music do you listen to?' 'Billie Eilish music.'" In that spirit, her signature goth-pop banger refuses to be pinned down, musically or emotionally; Eilish is on her knees one moment, a dominating bad guy the next, swerving through an underworld all her own.

## 35. Night Shift *Lucy Dacus* 2017

"THE FIRST TIME I tasted somebody else's spit/I had a coughing fit," Virginia singer-songwriter Dacus sings to kick off this six-minute indie-rock ballad, one of the decade's truly bracing breakup songs. "I dated this person for like five years," she said. "To kiss anybody else – it felt really weird."

## 36. Sicko Mode *Travis Scott feat. Drake* 2018

IT UNFURLED more like a playlist than a single: three distinct sections and three guests in just over five minutes. A verse from Drake – recorded the day before Scott's LP *Astroworld* was set to be released – contributed to the chopped-up format. As Scott put it, "Something so crazy for the kids."

## 37. My Church *Maren Morris* 2015

MORRIS DIDN'T HAVE a record deal when she recorded "My Church," a gospel-tinged stomper about flipping through the car radio and finding salvation in Hank Williams and Johnny Cash. A couple of million streams later, the

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# Teenage Dream

**Katy Perry** 2010

"WHEN I PUT THAT SONG ON," Lorde told *The New York Times*, "I'm as moved as I am by anything by David Bowie, by Fleetwood Mac, by Neil Young. It lets you feel something you didn't know you needed to feel. There's something holy about it." Slick California

pop tinged with just the right aftertaste of romantic nostalgia, "Teenage Dream" was one of five Number One hits from Perry's album of the same name. No one had done that since Michael Jackson's *Bad*. Perry concocted the song with producers Max Martin and Dr. Luke during sessions in Santa Monica, California, building around what she called "a Chaka Khan-fierce little beat." Considering the song's almost scientifically pop precision, it's no surprise its recording involved reworking the song "four or five" times to nail "that euphoric feeling of having a teenage love, all over again."



### SO, HOW WAS YOUR DECADE?

**MARGO PRICE**

### The Country Singer on Sturgill, Dolly, and Her DMs



The best album of the decade was: Sturgill Simpson's *Metamodern Sounds in Country Music*. That album changed the game. My favorite song of the 2010s was: Brittany Howard's "Stay High." It's a song I wish I wrote. The artist who had the best decade was: Dolly Parton.

There's not a lot of things that people see eye to eye on anymore, but Dolly is this cultural icon. The craziest thing that happened to me in the 2010s was: I went from being a waitress to playing *SNL*. The show I couldn't stop watching was: *Breaking Bad*. I've watched it twice all the way through. The misstep I learned the most from: Checking my DMs. You open a couple of dick pics and you're like, "OK, I'm not going in there again."

with a dead buddy's sister that becomes a road trip, and then a heartbreaking hookup that may turn out redemptive. Or not. "I attempted to turn it into a more traditional song," the Hold Steady frontman said. When the chorus finally lands, it's like the sun bursting through a dank Midwestern sky.

## 39. Bad Liar *Selena Gomez* 2017

GOMEZ DITCHED the Disney-princess pop of her teens for the grown-up grooves of *Revival* in 2015, telling ROLLING STONE, "I felt confident and comfortable in who I am. I felt sexy. I was aching to do stuff like that." She nailed it two years later with this spare confession hooked to the bass line of the Talking Heads' "Psycho Killer." An art-pop adventurer was born.

## 41. Novocane *Frank Ocean* 2011

OCEAN'S DEBUT single was a sexy, unnerving, indel-

ible future-blues that announced the arrival of a major talent. Packing a novel's worth of narrative into a five-minute slow jam, it name-checked Stanley Kubrick and dissected a drug-buddy hookup with an aspiring dental student at Coachella, outing a generation's numbness.

## 42. High for This *The Weeknd* 2011

A CREEPY SONG in which a man tries to talk a woman into doing drugs before they have sex, "High for This" was the ideal intro to the Weeknd's narcotic sound. The opening track on his debut LP, *House of Balloons* – a chronicle of "whatever thoughts I was having when I was under the influence at the time" – forecast R&B's brooding future.

## 43. Call Me Maybe *Carly Rae Jepsen* 2011

"WE LIKED HOW it turned out, but I can't say I expected this," said Jepsen of "Call Me Maybe," one of

the most dominant songs of the summer of all time. Everyone from Katy Perry to the Cookie Monster covered it, and it inspired countless song-as-meme videos. Not a bad debut for a third-place in the 2007 season of *Canadian Idol*.

#### 44. Beez in the Trap

**Nicki Minaj** 2011

FOLLOWING a directive, "Nicki needs some rap shit," from her record label Cash Money/Young Money, producer Kenoe delivered a track with a spartan, slow-rolling boom that gave the fiery rapper tons of space to rock out and deliver a master class in old-school playground swagger. "I am," Minaj noted, "always in the trap."

#### 45. Mariners Apartment Complex

**Lana Del Rey** 2018

THE FIRST TASTE of Del Rey's revelatory *Norman Fucking Rockwell!* was this psychedelic-folk gem, a meta-pop collaboration with Jack Antonoff that shuffles classic-rock allusions ("kiss the sky," "candle in the wind") and emotions, pivoting on the linchpin title verse of Leonard Cohen's abjectly needy "I'm Your Man." But Del Rey owns every word, carving out a complex sad-girl persona rooted in Laurel Canyon singer-songwriter tradition.

#### 46. N\*\*as in Paris

**Jay-Z and Kanye West** 2011

APPEARING AS their one-off duo, Watch the Throne, in Paris on June 18th, 2012, Kanye West and Jay-Z performed their dazzling victory lap "N\*\*as in Paris" 12 times before a rapturous crowd. That excess was the point; inspired by West's fashion-world exploits at the time, the song was the highest high on *Watch the Throne*, featuring a dubstep breakdown and a Will Ferrell cameo. It's also the most purely cathartic moment of either rapper's epic career so far.

FROM TOP: JOSEPHOKPAO/INVISION/AP IMAGES; CHARLES SYKES/INVISION/AP IMAGES; SHUTTERSTOCK; RAYW/SHUTTERSTOCK; IVORYHARRIS/INVISION/AP IMAGES; SHUTTERSTOCK

# Sounds of the Decade

Think all music sounded the same during the 2010s? Well, you're sort of right. Here are five sonic trends that defined the times.



## Saxual Healing

**WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE** The sassy spawn of "Careless Whisper"

**WHERE WE HEARD IT** After two decades of total exile, the saxophone made its big, blustery return in 2011 as the screaming partygoer on Katy Perry's "Last Friday Night" and the hype man of Lady Gaga's "The Edge of Glory." By mid-decade, it was practically inescapable, showing up in songs by Fifth Harmony, Jason Derulo, and even Taylor Swift.

**WHO USED IT BEST** Carly Rae Jepsen, on "Run Away With Me"



## The Millennial Whoop

**WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE** Over-the-top melisma, Gen Y-style

**WHERE WE HEARD IT** Early in the decade, singers inexplicably started yelling "Wa-oh-wa-oh" in their songs — Katy Perry on "California Gurls," Kesha on "Tik Tok," Frank Ocean on "Ivy." Sometimes it sounded happy, sometimes it sounded sad, but it always seemed awesomely unnecessary.

**WHO USED IT BEST** Comedy pop trio the Lonely Island, who parodied it on "F\*\*k Off"



## Trap Hi-Hat Snaps

**WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE** The skittering soul of Atlanta

**WHERE WE HEARD IT** Drum-machine hi-hats programmed at a speed and complexity no human could ever play fluttered out of the South via hits by Migos, Future, and others, and became a go-to beat — from Beyoncé's "Drunk in Love" to Ariana Grande's "Break Up With Your Girlfriend, I'm Bored" and Halsey's "Without Me."

**WHO USED IT BEST** Migos, on the diamond-bright "Stir Fry"



## Whisper Pop

**WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE** "Wait, what? Speak up, damn it."

**WHERE WE HEARD IT** In olden times, you couldn't be a pop star if you couldn't belt out your lyrics. But in the 2010s, a new wave of singers started whispering their way into our hearts — Lana Del Rey evoked entitled California malaise with her bored, breathy sighs, while moody teens Lorde and Billie Eilish went for more of a mumbling-into-their-sleeves vibe.

**WHO USED IT BEST** Eilish, on "Bad Guy"



## 'Glitch-core' Vocals

**WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE** The emo A.I. apocalypse

**WHERE WE HEARD IT** Twenty years after Auto-Tune made its debut on Cher's "Believe," vocals are chopped, pitch-shifted, and digitally messed with to a hilarious degree. Justin Bieber got turned into a sad dolphin on "Sorry," and Selena Gomez became a yodeling Cylon on "It Ain't Me."

**WHO USED IT BEST** Kanye West, who made his voice an anguished bass guitar on "Runaway"

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#### 47. 212

**Azealia Banks** 2011

AFTER FALLING into "a bit of a depression and shit" when her first attempts to break through in the music business proved unsuccessful, Banks made it work by going back to New York rap basics, jump-cutting from street queen to prep-school mean-girl thespian to R&B diva. Before the ascendancy of Nicki Minaj and Cardi B, "212" crowned Banks the fiercest female MC alive.

#### 48. Girl Crush

**Little Big Town** 2014

SOME RADIO programmers in Nashville might have worried about its homoerotic undercurrent. But "Girl Crush" was immediately recognized as one of the most indelible jealousy songs in country music history. "I knew as soon as I heard the hook of the first chorus that we had to have this song," Little Big Town's Karen Fairchild told ROLLING STONE.

#### 49. Every Breaking Wave

**U2** 2014

WITH PRODUCTION assists from Danger Mouse and One Republic's Ryan Tedder, Bono and team delivered a soaring anthem exploring his sense of "how hard it is to give yourself completely to another person." If the song conjures Coldplay, it's a testament to how fundamental U2 remains to the sound of mainstream rock. And the acoustic version is just as good.

#### 50. Turn Down for What

**DJ Snake and Lil Jon** 2013

A FRENCH PRODUCER and an Atlanta hollerer team up for a defiant party anthem so over-the-top you can't help but laugh out loud every time you hear it. The song showed up everywhere, including Michelle Obama's social media feed, where she rocked out to it in a Vine clip promoting good nutrition: "Turnip for what!"

# Albums of the Year 2019

Female stars owned the year in pop, while new faces made seismic breakthroughs in rap and Latin trap

## Thank U, Next

Ariana Grande

**1** GRANDE'S 2018 LP, *Sweetener*, was framed as a post-tragedy bright-side opus. But then life happened: Her ex Mac Miller died soon after the album's release, and her whirlwind engagement to Pete Davidson came to a screeching halt. In just two weeks, Grande let the tears flow and wrote a trap-R&B-pop masterpiece that nods to 'NSync and *The Sound of Music*, features appearances from her grandma and drag queen Shangela, and flexes her whistle register ("Imagine") alongside her rap skills ("7 Rings"). We're so fuckin' grateful for her exes too.



## 2. When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?

Billie Eilish

EILISH DISMANTLED and rebuilt the pop song on her debut LP. The 17-year-old layered bizarre sounds (the clicking of a crosswalk signal, a sample from *The Office*) under nihilistic lyrics about Satan and the downfall of humankind – all delivered in a characteristic whisper-hum. "Most people need to stand and open their diaphragms, but Billie sounds amazing just slumped on the bed," her producer brother, Finneas, said.

## 3. Norman Fucking Rockwell!

Lana Del Rey

DEL REY'S latest, greatest effort is a lush soft-rock album in the style of 1970s

Laurel Canyon, filled with characters whose dreams have long gone up in wildfire smoke. "I'm always going to be right here/No one's going anywhere," she intones on "How to Disappear." By invoking her subjects' let-down desires, the singer finally earned her title as queen of the West Coast.

## 4. Lover

Taylor Swift

NOBODY EVER accused Swift of holding back emotionally, but on *Lover*, she really lets it all loose. It's the album where she proves she can do it all: the country slow-dance swoon of "Lover," the synth-pop regret of "Cruel Summer," the obsessive electro-goth of "The Archer." These are the deepest love songs she's ever written, chron-

icling adult romance and the turning-30 blues with her usual eye for detail.

## 5. X 100pre

Bad Bunny

"MORE THAN 3,000 people died, and Trump's still in denial," Latin-trap star Bad Bunny said on *The Tonight Show* last year in the wake of Hurricane Maria. The statement foreshadowed the gravity of his debut LP, *X 100pre*. Volleying between shamelessly crude and totally vulnerable, Bad Bunny opened the floor for Latin pop that's not afraid to get uncomfortable.

## 6. Cuz I Love You

Lizzo

ON HER MAJOR-LABEL debut, Lizzo claims herself as her own "Soulmate" and leaves her baggage behind – as she boasts, "The only

exes that I care about are in my fucking chromosomes." "Tempo" is her club duet with Missy Elliott ("slow songs, they for skinny hoes"), while "Juice" goes for Eighties Minneapolis dance-floor gloss. And in "Jerome," she belts an old-school R&B ballad. Lizzo comes off like a young Tina Turner making a *Private Dancer* of her own, flaunting the coolest flute solos since Jethro Tull.

## 7. Father of the Bride

Vampire Weekend

IF VAMPIRE WEEKEND'S first three albums were their freshman, sophomore, and junior efforts, *Father of the Bride* felt like the work of a senior who'd returned from a gap year with strong opinions about the best "Dark Star." The album's kind vibes and earthy imagery suggested that Vampire Weekend had gone full jam band, but deeper listening revealed a tasteful palette rooted in Seventies Southern California. And Ezra Koenig's lyrics expertly capture the big and little tragicomedies that engulf individual lives and the world at large.

## 8. Wildcard

Miranda Lambert

WITH HELP FROM innovative producer Jay Joyce,

Lambert reinvigorated her sound with rock & roll energy on *Wildcard*. She experimented on the sleek "Mess With My Head" and the punk-tinged "Locomotive," but easily switched gears to bedrock country in "Tequila Does" and the stark closing track, "Dark Bars." Through it all, she held fast to hope. "If the whole wide world stops singing and all the stars go dark/I'll keep a light on in my soul/Keep a bluebird in my heart," she sings in "Bluebird."

## 10. The Highwomen

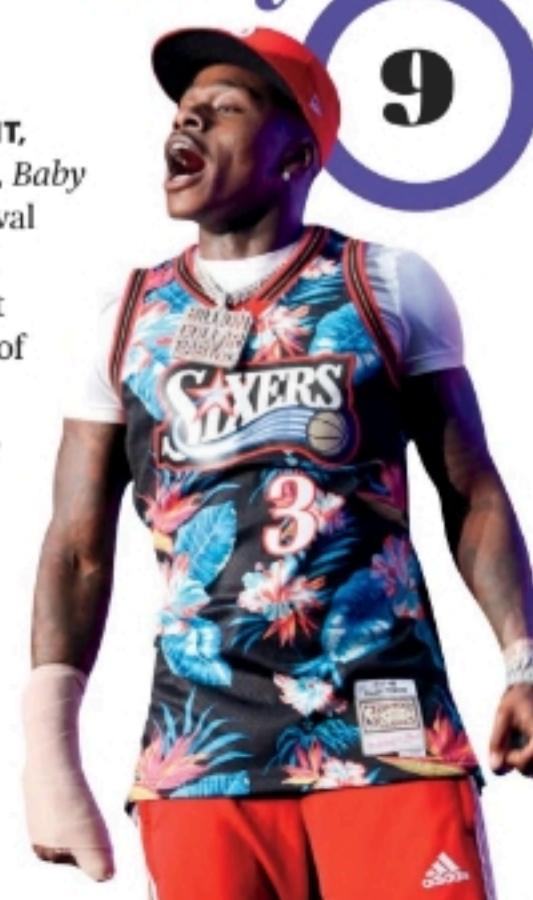
The Highwomen

WITH SONGS like "Redesigning Women," the debut from country supergroup the Highwomen celebrated the quartet's sisterly bond. But Brandi Carlile, Amanda Shires, Natalie Hemby, and Maren Morris sing about topics affecting us all, from the grand (the persecution of the historical characters in "Highwomen") to the minute (glorious kiss-off "Don't Call Me"). "I love that we have songs on this album about shattering female stereotypes to a gay country love song, and songs about losing loved ones," Morris told *Rolling Stone* ahead of the LP's release. "It's all real, and it's all country."

## Baby on Baby

DaBaby

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HYPER-REGIONAL, BLUNT, kinetic, and self-assured, *Baby on Baby* marked the arrival of a star. "Suge" became the rare 2019 rap hit that forgoes melody in favor of a torrent of bullish bars stacked atop a ceaseless, unending flow, while "Walker Texas Ranger" is the funniest Western-themed hip-hop song of the year (yes, even including "Old Town Road").

# Songs of the Year 2019

A creepy goth-pop anthem, a two-minute country-rap marvel, a Dead-ly art-pop throwback, and more

## 1. Bad Guy

*Billie Eilish*

EILISH rose out of the all-American teenage wasteland this year to turn into everybody's favorite pop nightmare. With "Bad Guy," she gave her generation the anthem it deserves, hitting Number One three years after she became a SoundCloud cult figure. It's the sound of a home-schooled 18-year-old weirdo turning her diaries into macabre bedroom trap pop.

## 2. Truth Hurts

*Lizzo*

"TRUTH HURTS" first came out in 2017, but 2019 was the year the song turned iconic. After being featured in Netflix rom-com *Someone Great*, "Truth Hurts" became the summer's most unstoppable breakup anthem, and with punchlines like "You're 'posed to hold me down, but you're holding me back/And that's the sound of me not calling you back," a self-love declaration for the ages.

## 4. Cruel Summer

*Taylor Swift*

LIKE SO MANY songs in the Swift's pantheon, "Cruel Summer" rides the knife edge of a crush – reckless, anticipating the crash, but consumed by the feeling. There's an acknowledgment that we've been here before ("Angels roll their eyes"), and even Swift seems exasperated, crying out



## Old Town Road

*Lil Nas X, With Billy Ray Cyrus*

A TWO-MINUTE trap-country song featuring a prominent Nine Inch Nails sample and a rap verse with Cyrus probably wasn't on your 2019 bingo card when the year started, but it's hard to look back at the past 12 months without humming it. The work of a college dropout who bought a beat online, the song went viral on TikTok and then attracted a remix cameo from pop Forrest Gump Cyrus. What followed was total cultural saturation and a heated debate about what "country" even is. More important, it'll be stuck in your head for years.

in the bridge, "I love you/ Ain't that the worst thing you ever heard?" The track is vintage Swift, a burst of mischief and desire, messy drama with a wink.

## 5. Suge

*DaBaby*

AT A TIME WHEN tuneful warblers rule the hip-hip charts, along comes DaBaby, who raps like he never heard a Drake track before and emphasizes his love for bygone hip-hop values by invoking Death Row Records impresario Suge Knight. The "Suge" beat, produced by Jetsonmade

and Pooh Beatz, is a minimal jackhammer, a long string of hi-hats punctuated by eruptions of bass. DaBaby squeezes syllables together in tightly wound patterns and sprays boasts that always seem to double as threats: "I'm the type to let a nigga think that I'm broke until I pop out with a million/Take 20K and put that on your head and make one of your partners come kill you."

## 6. Harmony Hall

*Vampire Weekend*

THE LEAD SINGLE from *Father of the Bride* kept one

foot in Vampire Weekend's old sound – departed co-founder Rostam Batmanglij gets a co-production credit – while stepping into a brave new jamband-y world, opening on a gorgeous guitar tapestry and segueing into a proudly ecstatic noodle-dance groove. "I don't wanna live like this, but I don't wanna die," declares Ezra Koenig, as his cryptic lyrics evoke the sad state of the nation. The track was the year's giddiest, most refreshing pop flashback.

## 7. Romana

*Bad Bunny/El Alfa*

BAD BUNNY made his breakthrough with *X 100pre*, and on the single "La Romana," the Puerto Rican trap king also introduced his new fan base to a rising star from a neighboring island: the Dominican dembow ambassador El Alfa. Chasing a piping hot combo of bachata and trap, El Alfa picks up the pace midtrack with a swift dembow riddim and chants for "Fuego, fuego, fiyah, fiyah!" His verses cut like sparks – igniting an international summer jam for the ages.

## 8. Lovestained

*Hope Tala*

TALA'S "Lovestained" effortlessly bridges regions and eras: The guitar suggests Brazil in 1965, the steel drums add a springy touch of the Caribbean, and the bass seems plucked from an irresistible hit on American rap radio in 1998. "That's what the vision is: bringing together bossa-nova influences and R&B all into one," explained the London singer-songwriter. She wrote "Lovestained" in a 30-minute flurry of creativity, and that



ease translates directly to the listener.

## 9. Seventeen

*Sharon Van Etten*

THIS POST-PUNK gem sums up the reinvention of an artist who previously spoke her truth in near-whispers with a guitar, instead of hollering it over snarling synths. The shift may stem from her touring with Nick Cave, or the changes of age and motherhood. Regardless, it's thrilling, never more so than on the screamed "Seventeen" bridge.



## Como Un Bebe

*J Balvin/Bad Bunny/Mr Eazi*

"I FEEL THIS is the first time there is pure Afro-beats from Nigeria in the pop scene," Nigerian singer Mr Eazi said of "Como Un Bebe," his killer collaboration with Bad Bunny and Colombian reggaeton king J Balvin. Balvin heard the groove and flipped, excited by the opportunity to "merge worlds." The final product features all three stars sharing the spotlight and throwing a simple command – "baila pa mi," or "dance for me." ®

**CONTRIBUTORS** Jon Blistein, Brenna Ehrlich, Suzy Exposito, Jon Freeman, Will Hermes, Charles Holmes, Joseph Hudak, Elias Leight, Claire Shaffer, Rob Sheffield, and Brittany Spanos

After 20 years of leading one of the world's biggest bands, Chris Martin decided he was done pleasing other people – and hit a new creative high

**By Jann S. Wenner**

# How Chris Martin Fixed Himself

# W

HEN COLDPLAY first appeared in our pages, in 2000, ROLLING STONE wondered: Were the new Brit-pop group “the next Radiohead? Or the next Verve, or Travis?” Today, it’s clear

they were none of those things. Over the past 20 years, Coldplay have carved out their own place in the world: as stadium-filling, genre-defying optimists in an age of irony. They are arguably the biggest band in the world today – their tour behind 2015’s *A Head Full of Dreams* grossed \$523 million, a run they kicked off with a set at the Super Bowl with Beyoncé and Bruno Mars. All of that success caused frontman Chris Martin to take a step back. “There was a slight sense of peace,” he says on a recent afternoon in New York. “All we have to do now is follow the muse.” Coldplay’s eighth album, *Everyday Life*, is unlike anything they’ve made before, a meditative double disc that embraces gospel, folk, and even Afrobeat. Martin addresses such hot-button subjects as gun control, mass incarceration, and racism (“Trouble in Town” features audio of Philadelphia police officers harassing innocent black suspects), as well as fatherhood (he has two children with ex-wife Gwyneth Paltrow). He’s proud of the album, even if he’s a little uncertain of its commercial viability. That contentment is something Martin has been working toward as long as he’s been writing. Here’s how he got there.

**What was the urge in you to play music? When did that start for you?**

When I was 11, I was at a very old-fashioned [boarding] school, and this teacher came in that was a bit of a maverick. I’d been told before that I wasn’t allowed to be musical, really, because I didn’t sing in the choir and stuff. And then this guy came in and said, “No. Everybody’s musical.” There were a bunch of these kids’ keyboards around the room, and he said, “Everyone go and mess around.” Something just opened. At the end of the class, I said, “Hey, this is what I got!” And he was very encouraging. That’s when the little fire started.

**In that moment?**

In that moment. I didn’t know what to do about that for a few years. I was having a bit of a rough time around 13, 14 [years old], and that’s when I knew: “I’ve got to go and make something of myself. Just hanging out and playing football is not working for me.”



**You didn't fit in with those guys?**

I did a bit, but I was going through some stuff with religion and sexuality, getting all confused, like most kids at that age. You're like, "What is happening?" And it can be brutal. But that lit the fire of, "All right. I'm going to just work."

**Who were you listening to?**

I had a very strange dual education. On the one hand, I was listening to a lot of church music, because we had to go and sing those hymns every day – those beautiful, big songs. Then I was into this band called James, all the sort of shoegazing stuff in England in the early Nineties. The Cure. Then I was into U2 and R.E.M. This guy in the year above me was obsessed with soul and rhythm & blues.

**The new album opens up with this full-out invocation of church, and a gospel choir. Throughout the album, there's a lot of cathedral stuff. What was your relationship with God and the church growing up?**

I was lucky when I was a kid, because my mom is from Zimbabwe. So I'd go there and see a very different side of the world. That made me realize there's a much bigger story going on than just me. My relationship with God at that time was to see God as a man in the sky with a beard, who was quite nice, but also quite punitive. If you did things wrong, you might risk burning for possibly a substantial amount of time, which is terrifying for kids. In the midst of the scariness of it is also a real warmth that comes from a lot of the great prophets, Jesus included. So there was a lot of beautiful stuff being fed to me. So, for a while I was like, "Half of this feels really right and half of it feels really scary."

**You share that background with U2. That was very much at the core of who they were and how they started out. Still, today, they're preaching.**

So, what happened to me was, when I went to boarding school, I walked a bit funny. And I was also very homophobic, because I was like, "If I'm gay, I'm completely fucked for eternity." And I was a kid discovering sexuality. "Maybe I'm gay. I can't be." I was terrified. I was in a boarding school with a bunch of quite hardcore kids, and for a few years they were very much like, "You're definitely gay," in quite a full-on manner, quite aggressively telling me that. It was weird for me for a few years.

**Did you think you were gay? You must have.**  
I don't know. I was like, "Even if I am, I can't be, because it's wrong." So that was creating terrible turmoil.

**Did they convince you that you were?**

I started to worry about it, for sure. At about 15 and a half, it all just stopped overnight, once I was like, "Yeah, so what if I'm gay?"

*"Rolling Stone" founder JANN S. WENNER interviewed Nancy Pelosi in March 2019.*

**We had to grow a bit of balls to be able to do this one. It's the first time we really said what we think. It's completely unfiltered, and it's very raw.**

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**What stopped?**

The worry about anyone teasing you. It might have been reading about Elton [John], realizing that a lot of my heroes are gay; it doesn't really matter. What that did was ease a big pressure, and made me question, "Hey, maybe some of the stuff I'm learning about God and everything, I'm not sure if I subscribe to." For me today, God is everything and everybody, and it's love, and it's the miracle in every cell of everything.

**You've been making commercial music for almost 20 years. You've made eight records in that time. Why does it take you so long to make a record?**

That's a great question. I feel we could have made 50 records in that time, but they'd be even worse.

**Is that self-effacing?**

It's not self-effacing at all. But ROLLING STONE and us have a checkered history, so I don't know what you might think about it. All journalists and us have a checkered history, and we embrace that, but I don't want to ever assume, "Yeah, we've made eight masterpieces." I remember when we first landed in America, to do *SNL*, and I read a ROLLING STONE review of our single, and it was not good.

**Which single?**

Our first, "Yellow." I was like, "Right. We've got to get better."

**It's interesting that you remember that, other than the 30 other good things we said about Coldplay. We said you were the biggest band of the year [in 2005].**

Yeah, thank you. Why does it take so long? There's just something in my body which says when something's finished. And it's only happened eight times. Actually seven times in the last 19 years, because once it didn't happen, and we still released the album: our third album, called *X&Y*.

**But that did rather fantastically, didn't it?**

But how it did is not [important].

**What's the moment that says, "We're done now"?**

If this sounds pretentious, forgive me, [but] if the album title is there in our heads, it's like a picture frame. And it's very clear what fits inside it. So even if there's 15 quite-good songs, if they don't fit the picture frame, they don't come in. So there are a lot of spare things floating around. Not as many as Bruce [Springsteen], who released that 72-track *Tracks*...

**So how does *Everyday Life* feel different to you?**

Well, it's its own world. We had to grow a bit of balls to be able to do this one. It's the first time we really said what we think about some things. And it's trying to be empathetic. It's completely unfiltered. It's very raw and pure.

**In a certain way, it feels like a concept album. Why a concept album, or even a double album, in a time when people are mainly concentrating on singles?**

Why are we shooting ourselves in the balls? Because that's what I was told to do. The last thing

we did was so fun, and we played to a lot of people in a lot of places. And we did the Super Bowl, and it was amazing, so there was a slight sense of peace. All we have to do now is follow the muse. I just wanted to sing about other people and how I feel about other people, how I feel about the world right now and everything that's going on. It's not really a concept beyond: "What does every day look like for me and everybody else?"

**And then at the end you say, "Got to keep dancing when the lights go out." Is that the message to take from this album?**

Yeah. I think, honestly, the thing we've done with this album is like, "Fuck it. I don't care what anybody thinks. Just let it flood through." The way I feel about life right now is, you've got to just hold it so preciously and embrace it and embrace everybody, and do your best to look after other people, 'cause ultimately that's looking after yourself, to see us as one. We travel the world so much that I really see us as one big family. I don't believe in tribalism. I don't believe in nationalism. I believe, like, we were put here by something way greater than us, and I'm in awe of that and so grateful to be here, let alone to be in this job.

**You have a couple of kids songs on there, like "Daddy."**

"Daddy" is partly about a bunch of people I know whose dads abandoned them. It's partly about me feeling like, "Am I with my kids enough?" And it's partly about the mass incarceration problem in America. Because so many dads are forcibly removed from their families on a systemic and institutionalized basis, which is wrong. So those kind of emotions all bubble together and then something like that comes out.

**It doesn't even sound like a rock song.**

We're not a rock band. Let's get that straight!

**And then you've got "Guns" ["The judgment of the court is we need more guns..."], which is a really uncharacteristic kind of Coldplay song. It sounds like a protest song.**

Clearly, because I live in Los Angeles now, I'm much more aware of the Second Amendment issues. I play music all the time, and suddenly a song sort of drops from the sky, and those are the ones that are the good ones. So many songs on this album happened like that.

**It sounds very Paul Simon, in the vocals and the rhythm.**

The honest answer is that it comes from listening to Paul Simon and Rammstein, which is a strange marriage. I was asking one of our producers, Bill [Rahko], who's a heavy metal-er, to teach me how to play those kind of riffs. I thought it would be interesting to try stuff like that on an acoustic folk song.

**When did you find that falsetto voice?**

When Radiohead broke through, I was a teenager, and they were from a similar background to me. So it opened up my whole world in terms of "Maybe this can be done." That record was *The Bends*, and Thom Yorke had heard Jeff Buckley singing falsetto. And then I found out "Oh, wow, I can sing really high like that." I think that at the age of 17 [or] 18, Jeff Buckley and Radiohead really opened up a whole new world for me.



**IN MY PLACE** Top: Martin performing in Amman, Jordan, in November. Coldplay played most of their new album, an experience they called "a dream." Above: Martin with Beyoncé at the Super Bowl in 2016. She joined Coldplay for "Formation."

**You worked with Brian Eno for a couple of albums. How much did U2 influence you?**

On our third album, you can definitely hear U2. That's the only time, if you want the honest answer, that we said, "Let's step into that space." I think that U2 and R.E.M. were an influence in how they operate: how they treat each other, how they split their money and credit, and their unashamedness in allowing themselves to be big. It's funny to be talking about this when we just made a record that's tiny and small.

**But still, you're going to be a stadium band.** Who knows? Whether anyone comes is [to be seen]. And we're not touring this album. We're doing some strange little events and some tiny shows, because it's more intimate. What the

phrase "stadium band" means to me is a collective consciousness, really. Are there going to be points when the whole building is singing the same thing, or in the same zone? It's not them watching you, or you playing to them – it's us creating this one thing together. 'Cause it's a big energy.

**What are you thinking about onstage?**

I'm thinking about those moments. We really love when the wristbands light up. They were basically made by this guy that made sex toys. He was supposed to come to a show 10 years ago and he couldn't get to the show, and he wrote an email to Phil, who's my best friend, our creative director, and Phil said, "We'll arrange something." And in return, this guy said, "By the way, I've been inventing this wristband that lights up. Do you guys want it?" Phil's like, "Are you fucking [kidding]?" Yes. So we invested in it and made it. So I look forward to when those switch on, because that's when I really feel like, "OK, I love [performing for] this many people." I love it.

**When you go see Bruce Springsteen, it's the same. He's very consciously trying to lift you up.**

When Bruce Springsteen came into my life, it was the same as when Rumi the poet came into my life. It was fucking life-changing. Because Bruce made it and then was like, "OK, what am I going to do from this position?" Rather than, "I've made it, let me retire and have a horse ranch." [He says], "What am I going to do with this gift I've been given?" And he delivers on it a thousand times over. He pours everything into it. I realized from seeing Bruce, [my job] is to be totally and unashamedly of service to the people

that are listening. Just to be 100 percent used by the forces that gave you this gift in the first place.

**Did you pick up anything more specific than that from Bruce?**

I also love his music. I first got in through listening to Johnny Cash's "Highway Patrolman" cover, which led me to *Nebraska*. I was like, "Oh, this is not what I thought Bruce Springsteen was." Then I went back to [Greetings From] Asbury Park and *Born to Run*. It all started feeding in, and looking at his attention to detail...

**He's single-minded. He's a rigorous fucking thinker. You and I met backstage at a Bruce show.**

Yeah, we did. Across a crowded room. You said, "Can you get me a drink, please?" and I said, "No, I'm a rock star."

**I knew you were a rock star. You were suspicious why a member of the press was sitting opposite you in the dressing room.**

Definitely. At the time, I'm like, "This is the guy who has *Us Weekly*, and paparazzi, and stuff." I'm like, "I don't know how I feel about this." I now have very different feelings about you as a person, who I really love.

**Let me just ask you two things. I saw somewhere you were described as the world's sexiest vegetarian.**

Yeah. I think that's wrong on three counts.

**What other self-deprecating news do you have for me?**

I'm North London's most hardworking pescatarian who eats turkey. Less of a glamorous title.

**What does being a sex symbol, stadium star do to your head?**

You'd have to ask someone else. I don't feel like that right now, Jann. When I'm doing it, I feel like that.

**You're kind of an anti-rock-star — except that you're extremely discreet.**

I don't know what you mean by that.

**You play your cards close to the vest.**

I do. Yeah.

**And you stay out of the way of the press.**

I try to.

**Why?**

All our songs are very personal. So it's all in there, all of the loves and the losses and everything. It's all in there. And I'm more subscribed to the Bob Dylan thing of don't explain any song, because why ruin someone else's interpretation of it? All of our songs are very personal to me, and must in some way have been poured through the percolator of our life.

**You were quoted as saying you want to be the biggest band in the world.**

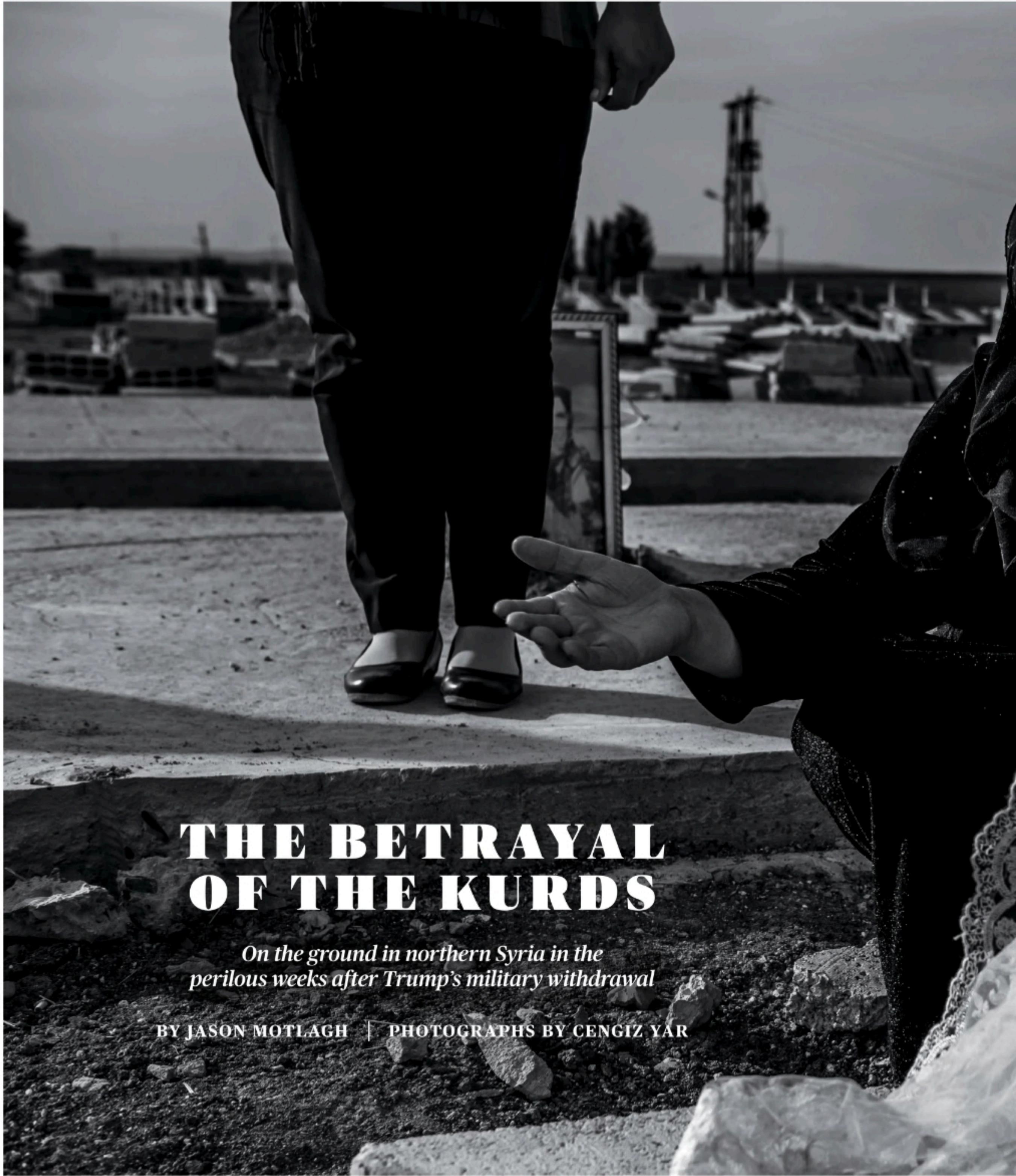
Yeah.

**Have you done that?**

I would never say that.

**I've heard it before. The Beatles said that. U2 famously said that. What's that about?**

I don't care about that thing anymore. I feel like I realize that our job is just to be the best us in the world. And exist because we love it, and we really love it, and reach as many people as want to be reached by making records and by traveling around to see people. We are the best Coldplay ever. ®



# THE BETRAYAL OF THE KURDS

*On the ground in northern Syria in the  
perilous weeks after Trump's military withdrawal*

BY JASON MOTLAGH

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CENGIZ YAR



#### A MOTHER'S GRIEF

*Souad Mohammad at the grave of her daughter, Hevrin Khalaf, a Kurdish political leader who was murdered by a Turkish-backed militia in October. Hundreds of civilians have been killed and 300,000 displaced since Turkey's invasion into northern Syria.*



**I**N THE MORNING of October 12th, Hevrin Khalaf, a rising young Kurdish political leader, rode along the M4 highway in northern Syria. Seated in the back of a bulletproof Toyota SUV, she rushed past the battle-scarred villages of her homeland, now three days into a brutal military assault from Turkey, made possible by Donald Trump's decision to pull U.S. troops from the region. She was on her way to Raqqa, the short-lived capital of the Islamic State and the largest and most heavily damaged city in Kurdish-held territory. Raqqa was beginning to recover, and Khalaf was headed to one of her frequent political meetings there. In 2018, she had helped found the Future Syria Party (FSP), with the lofty goal of advancing pluralism and democracy across Syria's sectarian fault lines.

Khalaf, 35, a Syrian Kurd with long brown hair and a dimpled chin, believed a new kind of politics was needed. Kurds, Christians, Turkmens, and Arabs alike had suffered under the Syrian regime and ISIS' reign of terror, and she wanted to unify historically fractious communities fed up with violence. "The aim of our party is unity and brotherhood for everybody who lives on this land," she said in February. "We will engage in dialogue with all people to restore the spirit of tolerance in the region."

Khalaf lived in Derik, a working-class city of cinder-block buildings, about six miles from the Turkish border. It was part of the Kurdish-led semi-autonomous region in northeast Syria known as Rojava, an area that became a symbol of hope for the long-persecuted minority, 35 million strong, divided among four hostile countries. Rojava champions diversity, self-rule, and women's rights. It is the "most inclusive governance structure in the most diverse region of Syria," says Nicholas Heras, the Middle East security fellow at the Center for a New American Security.

The democratic experiment could not have emerged under more adverse circumstances. Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad's regime is determined to reclaim every inch of territory lost during the country's nine-year civil war, and it has made steady gains, with backing from Russia and Iran. The Kurds and Assad had maintained a de facto non-aggression pact for most of the conflict, allowing the Kurds to focus on their own affairs until the ISIS threat emerged. Aided by U.S. air power and special forces, Kurdish fighters cleared the militants from one-third of the country, at a cost of more than 11,000 lives.

The hard-won calm was shattered in early October. Khalaf's car sped through a countryside once

again under bombardment. Less than a week earlier, following a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Trump ordered all U.S. military forces to withdraw from Syria, effectively green-lighting the attack on the Kurds. Turkey had already launched limited military operations along the border in 2016 and 2018 but had been held in check by the American presence. They viewed the Kurds' main force, the YPG, as an extension of the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party, which it considers a terrorist group. Turkey's declared intention is to create a 20-mile-deep, 300-mile-long "safe zone" in Kurdish

Turkish-backed militia. A video posted online shows the Toyota askew off-road, riddled with bullets. The driver lies dead, facedown in the dirt as militants crowd around him. "Another fleeing pig has been liquidated by the hands of the National Army," one man gloats. A female voice is briefly audible in the background. These are the last words ever heard from Khalaf.

I ENTERED SYRIA 10 days into the Turkish assault, coming overland from Iraq, taking the only border crossing still open, at Semelka, a pontoon bridge across the Tigris River. Vans packed with people pass us on their way out, sagging close to the ground. We drive fast, past shuttered shops and billboards of martyred YPG fighters, eager to get off the dark road. ISIS sleeper cells and militias had been setting up fake checkpoints, and Turkish shells were killing and maiming at random.

Under fire from both Republicans and Democrats for his careless decision, Trump had dispatched Vice President Mike Pence to broker a temporary cease-fire, but artillery barrages, drone attacks, and ground incursions continued, making a mockery of Trump's pledge to "obliterate" the Turkish economy with sanctions if it did anything "off-limits." To date, several hundred civilians have been killed and more than 300,000 people displaced, most of them pushed deeper into Kurdish-held territory, where schools are being converted into shelters. Another 15,000 and counting have become refugees in Iraq.

I visit Khalaf's family compound in Derik. Relatives and friends grieve in silence and drink bitter coffee beneath posters of her face. Wearing an all-black abaya festooned with a YPG flag pin, Khalaf's mother, Souad Mohammad, takes phone calls from media outlets in Europe. "I hope the blood of my daughter will unite all of Kurdistan – Kurds, Arabs, Christians – and I hope the whole nation will live in peace," Mohammad says, her anger

building in a crescendo that fills the room. "Hevrin sacrificed her soul for this. *Sehid namirin! Sehid namirin! Sehid namirin!*" Martyrs never die.

Mohammad shows me a wall-to-wall banner featuring her two brothers and first-born daughter – all of them guerrillas who died fighting for Kurdish autonomy in Turkey. Khalaf's image had been added to the martyrs' gallery, but her mother insists she was a different breed: "Hevrin did not believe violence would work. She never touched a bullet."

Khalaf's promise did not go unnoticed by U.S. officials. She and other leaders were tasked with the "necessary and often thankless task of building stability after ISIS that the U.S. had required of them," says Heras. On October 3rd, State Department representatives had visited the FSP in Raqqa, says party president Ibrahim al-Qaftan, and assured them that their party would have a role in international talks



#### 'MARTYRS NEVER DIE'

*Khalaf advocated for tolerance and democracy. "Hevrin didn't believe violence would work," her mother says. "She never touched a bullet."*

lands, to buffer Turkish territory and resettle millions of Syrian war refugees. But people fear a more malevolent goal. "It has to be understood," says Kurdish journalist Mohammed A. Salih, a Ph.D. student at the University of Pennsylvania, "as a deliberate act of setting up the Kurds and religious minorities in northeastern Syria for ethnic cleansing."

Khalaf had brushed aside warnings not to travel. "She was braver than any man I know," says her friend and party member, Samira Abdel Aziz. On the highway near the town of Tal Abyad, Khalaf's vehicle was ambushed by Ahrar al-Sharqiya, a



over Syria's future. (The State Department did not respond to repeated requests for comment.)

As secretary-general of the Future Syria Party, Khalaf kept a dizzying schedule and met frequently with Arab tribal leaders to build trust and resolve disputes, says al-Qaftan, an Arab. She also led workshops for victims of domestic abuse and tutored students in math, leaving little time for herself.

"She was concerned with bigger things," says Sertistan Haji, a friend since childhood. Never married, Khalaf lived in the same room she grew up in, with few indulgences: scented candles, dark chocolate, poetry. Haji hands me a half-finished volume by Kurdish writer Loran Khatib about a woman's struggle for respect in a conservative, male-centric culture. "Hevrin always said we must raise our voice," says Haji.

According to an autopsy report, Khalaf sustained multiple gunshots and fractures to her leg and skull; flesh was ripped out of her scalp, a sign she had been dragged by force before execution. Turkish state-linked media immediately hailed a "successful operation" to "neutralize" a politician affiliated with a "terrorist" group. Khalaf, her driver, an aide, and at least eight more unarmed civilians were murdered that day on the same stretch of road. Amnesty International decried the summary killings

#### THE FALLEN

*Marwan Khalaf, a fighter with the Kurds, was killed by Turkish-backed militants who were clearing the way for Syrian Arab refugees to be resettled in Kurdish lands.*

and other indiscriminate attacks on residential areas as war crimes.

Khalaf's mother says Khalaf's face was mutilated beyond recognition, her neck, ears, and wrists stripped of jewelry, like they wanted to "erase" her. "She was not against Turkey; she was not against anyone," Mohammad says. "How could the U.S. let Erdogan do this?"

**S**INCE BEFORE TAKING OFFICE, Trump had expressed an aversion to open-ended wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that have cost tens of thousands of lives and trillions of dollars. But for a businessman with a cynically transactional nature, supporting the Kurds made good sense: a low-cost, high-reward investment (the U.S. had about 1,000 special forces on the ground) that held stability across a vast swath of Syria while keeping Assad's regime, and its Russian and Iranian backers, in check.

"You are leaving us to be slaughtered," Gen. Mazlum Kobane Abdi, commander of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), told the top American diplomat in northern Syria, William Roebuck, in a meeting the day Khalaf was killed. If the U.S. did not intervene, he warned, he would be forced to cut a deal with Russia and Assad, for protection from Turkey. Ten days later, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Erdogan announced a pact that saw Russian and Turkish forces take joint control of Kurdish-held territory. Seemingly on a whim, Trump had managed to upend the dream of Rojava; swing the balance of power in Syria decisively in favor of arch foes Assad, Russia, and Iran; and risk giving a second wind to ISIS.

The sudden shift and ignominy that followed – Russian flags raised at vacant U.S. outposts, Kurds pelting American convoys with rocks and garbage – has rankled active-duty special-forces operatives. "The guys I've spoken with are very disappointed," says a veteran of the campaign against ISIS. "The Kurds are the most motivated and capable partner forces I've ever served with – they fought to the death – and they've gotten the short end of the stick again," he says, noting the long history of American betrayal of the Kurds, including when President

## THE BETRAYAL OF THE KURDS

George H.W. Bush called on them to rise up against Saddam Hussein in 1991, only to stand by as they were massacred.

"The consequences of such unreliability from the Oval will reverberate well beyond Syria," tweeted Brett McGurk, who served as the special presidential envoy to combat ISIS from 2015 to 2018. "The value of an American handshake is depreciating. Trump today said we could 'crush ISIS again' if it regenerated. With who? What allies would sign up? Who would fight on his assurances?"

U.S. officials estimate there are as many as 18,000 ISIS members still at large in Iraq and Syria; another 12,000 are being held in Kurdish prisons, where control is now in jeopardy. A Kurdish intelligence official tells me that all ISIS prisoners have been relocated farther south from the Turkish-occupied zone. "We are protecting not just for Europe but all the world," he says, "but our biggest priority is fighting against Turkey and the defense of our nation." Half the prison guards have been pulled away to fight since the invasion began, he says, and more than 100 fighters have already escaped, along with 785 sympathizers.

ISIS is brazenly exploiting the vacuum. In Qamishli, a bomb detonated in the city center the day I left, the second attack in as many weeks attributed to ISIS. On November 11th, three explosions claimed six more lives. That same day, an Armenian priest and his father were murdered on a highway south of the city. ISIS took credit. According to the Rojava Information Center, ISIS is targeting people who work with Kurdish-led authorities in Deir Ezzour province, claiming over 100 killings since the Turkish invasion. Lina Abdulwahid, another female leader of the Future Syria Party, was shot on November 17th but survived.

Meanwhile, Trump has backtracked on his call for a full withdrawal and redeployed U.S. troops to secure oil fields around Deir Ezzour. Despite his claims of "massive amounts of oil," Syria's reserves amount to less than one percent of global output, and experts say it would require many years and billions in investment to rehabilitate the infrastructure. And then there's the fact that the oil belongs to Syria. Senior U.S. officials have tried to downplay the oil gambit, but Trump has been publicly stating that troops remain "only for the oil." Some 500 to 600 U.S. forces will stay indefinitely with a hazy mandate to protect oil fields, not our besieged Kurdish allies who sacrificed so much in the name of pluralism.

In November, a leaked memo from Roebuck, the American envoy in northern Syria, slammed the Trump administration for not doing enough to stop the Turkish invasion, which "represents an intention-laced effort at ethnic cleansing." House Democrats and Republicans are trying to impose sanctions on Turkey, but the legislation would have to pass a Republican-controlled Senate and then be signed by the president. Were there any doubt on where Trump stands, on November 13th he honored Erdogan with a White House reception and thanked him for the job he's done in Syria, declaring himself "a big fan."

**T**HE ROAD FROM QAMISHLI to Iraq is grim. "Rojava is our nation," says our chain-smoking driver, Abdulrahman, waving a tattooed arm across the horizon. "We are not refugees on this land – this is our land!" But the scenes we pass say otherwise. Some SDF checkpoints are totally empty, torn flags whipping in the wind; others are guarded by a few holdouts. Oil pumps creak on the gray horizon, the air tinged with acrid smoke from makeshift refineries. Flatbed trucks full of fleeing families queue at gas stations. Those without transport wait road-



### REGIONAL UNITY

Ismael Jawadi (left), an Arab schoolteacher in Tel Hamis, supports the Kurdish-led SDF and is worried about Turkey attacking his town. "They are a NATO power," he says. "They can kill us any way they want."

### SHOCK TACTICS

Children play outside Khalaf's home in Derik, six miles from the Turkish border, well within shelling range. A spate of videos online shows Kurdish captives being tortured and executed by Turkish-backed militants.



“The Kurds are the most motivated and capable partner forces I’ve ever served with,” says a U.S. special-forces operative. “And they’ve gotten the short end of the stick – again.”

THE BETRAYAL OF THE KURDS





side for a ride, clutching what they can carry: infants, bedrolls, plastic bags of clothes.

As we move along, Abdulrahman concedes it may be time to move his family to Iraq – or “pick up my gun again” – fearful that the Syrian regime will expand its presence and enact reprisals. The previous night, Russia and Turkey announced a deal to carry out joint ground patrols in northeast Syria and allow Syrian troops to move back into border areas from which they’d been absent for years.

Until Rojava, Kurds had lived as second-class citizens in Syria, their language and culture suppressed. Back in 2008, Abdulrahman spent 14 months in prison for lighting a bonfire on the Naw Ruz holiday, disregarding a regime prohibition against celebrations. When fighting broke out in his native Aleppo, he joined a Kurdish protection unit and fought more than three years to beat back jihadist and Assad forces, losing some 30 friends along the way. “Nowhere is safe for the Kurds,” he says. “If the racist regime comes back, they won’t allow us to breathe.”

Erdogan intends to fill Kurdish areas with 2 million Syrian Arabs who are currently refugees in Turkey. Proxy militias are clearing the way, deploying cruel shock tactics. Turkish-backed fighters have been accused of attacking civilians with white phosphorus, a highly flammable chemical that eats flesh. A spate of videos has emerged showing militants torturing Kurdish captives and mutilating dead bodies. In one recording, a man goes door-to-door in the border town Serekaniye, shouting “kill the pigs, kill the infidels” as he spray-paints vacant homes to differentiate which belonged to Kurds, Christians, and Muslim Arabs. He pledges to burn the first, loot the second, and leave the third untouched.

“Turkey is planting the seeds of future civil strife between Arabs and Kurds,” says Hassan Hassan, director of the nonstate actors program at the Center for Global Policy. He suspects that radical militias like Ahrar al-Sharqiya, the group that killed Khalaf, have been put forward as the “face” of the campaign to aggravate sectarian tensions. “It is a sinister agenda.”

When we reach the border, Abdulrahman bids us a quick goodbye, eager to get back to his wife and children in Qamishli. He named his baby girl Hevrin; she was born two days after the politician was slain. I ask why he chose her name. “Because she gave us dignity,” he says.

Over the border in Iraqi Kurdistan, refugee camps are swelling. At the entrance to Bardarash, a vast U.N.-run camp, Amin Mohammad and his family stand amid the swarm waiting for their housing assignment. Mohammad’s broth-

#### IN THE LINE OF FIRE

*Juliet Nicola recovers from shrapnel wounds to her back and stomach in a hospital in Qamishli, the de facto capital of Rojava. “She may never walk again,” says her husband, Fadi. Their home and shop were destroyed by Turkish shelling.*

er was killed by a Turkish shell in Serekaniye on the first day of the Turkish offensive, while riding his motorcycle to the market to buy food. Their family home was also leveled, and for the past 14 days they had moved from village to village, sleeping rough by the road and scrounging for food. "We are so tired," Mohammad says. "I can't think about the future of Rojava, just how to find rice to eat."

For the next half-hour they wander through a maze of white canvas tents searching for their new home. They trudge past gaggles of scruffy children and the flat stares of families, until they spot a tent spray-painted with their number, C-652. Daylight is fading fast, and everyone hurries to set up bedding on the concrete slab, which is flooded from a broken outhouse pipe.

"I wish I had died in my home, not here," says Mohammad's wife, Hukmiya. "The Americans sold us out. May the same thing happen to Erdogan and Trump – one day they should live under a tent."

Just across the lane, Selva Sedo cradles her nine-month-old daughter, Nivar. Originally from Raqqa, Sedo moved to the Kurdish enclave of Afrin in 2014 to escape the fighting, and had to move again when Turkey occupied the town in early 2018. She was living in Serekaniye with her husband until Turkish shelling forced her to leave once more. "The war is following me," she deadpans.

Sedo's parents are still in Afrin. Most of its former 200,000 Kurdish residents have left, but those who remain face harassment and looting from Syrian Arab militias involved in Turkey's current operation. "I'm so sick of fighting," she says. "I want to leave Syria, [and] Kurdistan. I'll go anywhere outside the Middle East." After a pause, she asks. "Do you know anyone who can help me get to Europe?"

**O**N MY LAST AFTERNOON in Syria, Souad Mohammad takes me out to the martyrs' cemetery where Khalaf is buried. It sits on the outskirts of Derik, about three miles from the Turkish border, well within shelling range. An airstrike near the cemetery five days earlier forced the family to cancel a visit.

The road out of town is empty of cars and people. With few words between us, we pass a vacant camp that used to house scores of Yazidis, the religious minority that Kurdish fighters rallied to save from an ISIS campaign of systemic slaughter as much of the world stood by and did nothing.

We pull up to the cemetery gate. More than 1,200 fallen are interred on the grounds, some 700 of whom perished in the battle against ISIS. We pass row after row of framed portraits of the dead, an even mix of women and men in camo fatigues, some stern and some smiling, until we arrive at Khalaf's grave, draped with plastic flowers and a sash reading MARTYRS NEVER DIE.

Mohammad sinks to her knees. "Oh, my dear, oh, my dear. How much I miss you. You gave your life for peace, your blood for brotherhood. Where are human rights? Where is the world?"

Nearby, a weary group of YPG fighters takes turns digging nine fresh graves for comrades killed in recent clashes at the border. Behind them, a walled expanse longer than a football field sprawls flat and unbroken, waiting for tomorrow's casualties. ☀



### LOOKING FOR A HOMELAND

Bardarash, a U.N.-run camp just over the border in Iraq (above), has been swelling with thousands of refugees since the invasion. Amin Mohammad's family (left) made it to Bardarash after two weeks on the road. Their home was leveled, and his brother killed by a shell on the first day of the assault. "I can't think about the future of Rojava," Mohammad says, "just how to find rice to eat."



“Nowhere is safe for the Kurds,” says Abdulrahman, who lost some 30 friends fighting in the civil war. “If the racist [Assad] regime comes back, they won’t allow us to breathe.”

# STIHL LEGACY

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# Reviews

## Music

### HARRY'S BIG BREAKUP ADVENTURE

*The English pop star makes retro-rock with a sensitive touch on his second LP*

By NICK CATUCCI



**Harry Styles**

Fine Line

COLUMBIA

★★★★★

**I**F YOU'RE LISTENING for evidence of the many psychedelic mushrooms Harry Styles says he ate while making his outstanding second album, you will have to wait until *Fine Line*'s second-to-last song. But when "Treat People With Kindness" arrives, it trips balls. Musing about "floating up and dreaming, dropping into the deep end" over a feverish groove of congas, hand claps, and Mellotron, Styles calls upon a gospel chorus to take him even higher: "Maaaaybe, we can find a place to *feeeeel* good," they thunder. "To feel good!" On his 2017 debut, *Harry Styles*, the breakout One Direction heartthrob believably staked his claim to Seventies rock-star tradition. But ➔



## → HARRY STYLES

*Fine Line* is not exactly the magical mystery tour one might have assumed he'd set his sights on this time out. Like his brilliant uniform of flowing, high-waisted trousers and shagadelic chest-baring shirts, it's a streamlined, party-ready, primary-colors take on the enduring concept of the rock & roll starman. With short-story lyrics about a family man's life of quiet desperation and a six-minute build to wailing-guitar drama, "She" might be the closest thing here to a "Sign of the Times"-style homage to Bowie and the Beatles. Usually, the Sixties and Seventies signifiers sprinkled throughout the album — a little organ, some clav, and even George Harrison specials like electric sitar and sarangi — are Vitamixed into pop-rock smoothies you can dance to, like the strutting "Adore You" and soulful "Lights Up."

Aided by genre-fluid songwriters like Jeff Bhasker, Amy Allen, and Greg Kurstin, Styles is also now mining some rich millennial veins as well. Busy and beachy, "Sunflower, Vol. 6" could sit next to Vampire Weekend on any playlist. The title track emerges from a darkly beautiful, Bon Iver-like haze into a big, semi-hopeful, brass-and-martial-drums finish; with a measure of uncertainty fitting the close of this chaotic decade, Styles promises "We'll be all right."

That "we," as his fans will surely speculate, may be Styles and his ex, the French model Camille Rowe. On "Cherry," he sings, "I just miss your accent and your friends." But Styles sets himself apart from earlier rock gods with the gentlemanly way he delivers his broken-hearted blues. "I'm just an arrogant son of a bitch who can't admit when he's sorry," he confesses in the syncopated slow burner "To Be So Lonely." In the otherwise forgettable ballad "Falling," he channels every woman hounded by a needy guy (or worse), asking, "What if I'm someone I don't want around?" If there's a nontoxic masculinity, Styles just might've found it. And that's the kind of magic mushrooms can't buy. ☀

# Quick Hits

Ten new albums you need to know about now



## Beach Slang

### The Deadbeat Bang of Heartbreak City

Bridge 9



**PUNK FUN** Beach Slang's James Alex re-ups the Replacements' underdog thrash for a new generation, and he's so on point, the 'Mats' Tommy Stinson plays bass on "Tommy in the 80's."



## Tinashe

### Songs for You

Tinashe Music



**R&B TREAT** Whether she's singing like a soulful thrush, rapping in a Migos flow, or chanting over a house beat, the risk-taking singer masterfully draws you into her romantic pleasures and anxieties.



## Marcus King

### El Dorado

Fantasy



**SUBTLE JAMS** This breakout South Carolinian is a guitar firebrand and an able soul shouter who cares about rhythmic intricacy more than big solos, at times suggesting an Allmans session at Hi Records.



## Pinegrove

### Marigold

Rough Trade



**DOWN-HOME EMO** Evan Stephens Hall writes poetic, diary-ish lyrics, and the rest of the band burnishes them in a sound that's like the Promise Ring gone country, and heartwarming so.



## Algiers

### There Is No Year

Matador



**BASEMENT SOUL** The Atlanta band's retro R&B can feel a little murky, submerging singer Franklin James Fisher in sonic shadow — but when Algiers crank it up, their third album can be a blast.



## Harry Nilsson

### Losst and Founnd

Omnivore



**TALKIN' AGAIN** A posthumous LP from the brilliant Seventies pop oddball, recorded in the Eighties, and before his death in 1994; his once-golden voice is gravelly and weathered, but the genius still flashes.



## Ozuna

### Nibiru

Aura Music



**REGGAETON IN SPACE** Puerto Rican star Ozuna's latest has a so-so sci-fi concept and cameos from Rae Sremmurd's Swae Lee and Diddy. Its best moments see him deliver emotional dancer-floor thrills.



## Little Big Town

### Nightfall

Capitol



**SERIOUS COUNTRY** The closest thing Nashville has to a Fleetwood Mac tango through a dark night of the soul on a sophisticated, personal set. Highlight: "The Daughters," about sexist double standards.



## ...And You Will Know Us By Our Trail of Dead

### X: The Godless Void and Other Stories

Dine Alone



**NINETIES NOISE** Trail of Dead formed in 1994; their 10th album sounds as though they had been sitting on it since then, showing off a total mastery of their big Texan fusion of grunge and emo.



## Blake Shelton

### Fully Loaded: God's Country

Warner Bros.



**SAME OL' VOICE** The brooding title track on this mix of recent hits and new material is one of Shelton's best. But a lot of the set (including the Trace Adkins collab "Hell Right") is by-the-numbers party country.



CONTRIBUTORS: JON DOLAN, JON FREEMAN, KORY GROW, WILL HERMES, ANGIE MARZOCCIO, GARY SUAREZ

FROM TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: ADRIAN MONROY/MEDICOS Y MEDICAS/GETTY IMAGES; JOHN SHEARER/ACMA 2019/GETTY IMAGES; B. DIAMOND/GETTY IMAGES; MELANIE LEMARIE/SHUTTERSTOCK; EARL GIBSON III/GETTY IMAGES; MELANIE LEMARIE/SHUTTERSTOCK

REVIEWS

## HALSEY'S CHAOTIC QUEST

*The pop rebel airs all her pain and chases her bliss* By ROB SHEFFIELD

EARLY ON HALSEY'S excellent new album, *Manic*, she samples a bit of movie dialogue: "I'm just a fucked-up girl looking for my own piece of mind. Don't assign me yours." It's from the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, spoken by the manic, pixie dream-girl heroine Clementine. But she definitely speaks for Halsey. And as you've probably guessed, the singer doesn't even come close to finding peace of mind in these songs. Still, she knows how to make it a thrilling quest. *Manic* is Halsey's raw autobiographical portrait of the artist as a young mess, craving her share of love and tenderness in a hostile world. Yet Halsey's Ashley



Halsey

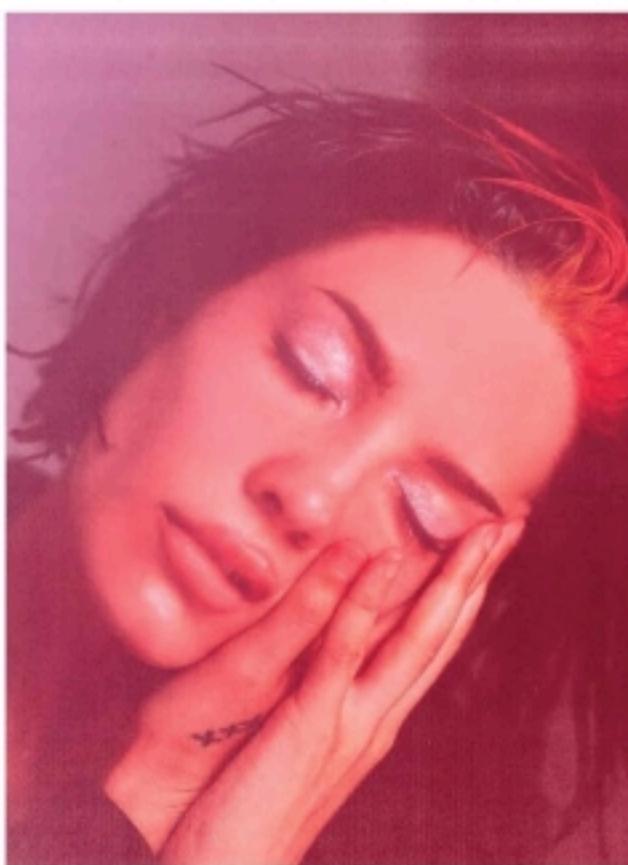
Manic

Capitol

★★★★★

Frangipane is a mess who's a hungrily ambitious artist seeing herself as a mirror for her entire generation.

And she curates one mean mixtape. As she told ROLLING STONE last summer, *Manic* is



"hip-hop, rock, country, fucking everything." Who else but Halsey would get stellar guest shots from Alanis Morissette and Suga from BTS on the same album?

*Manic* is her first album since *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*, her 2017 Romeo and Juliet trip, set in a Shakespearean dystopia. But *Manic* is about the here-and-now

real world and her fight for a place in it as a young woman.

As she confesses in "Still Learning," "I should be living the dream/ But I go home and I got no self-esteem."

She gets introspective, exploring everything from Lilith Fair folk guitar to South Korean rap. Morissette definitely sounds like a kindred spirit,

letting loose some Cher-like wails straight from the *City of Angels* soundtrack while Halsey purrs, "Your pussy is a wonderland."

She fantasizes about getting revenge for her emotional wounds in "Killing Boys" and "I Hate Everybody." In "929" she gives a rundown of her twentysomething angst: loneliness, anxiety,

real estate purchases, hair loss, falling in love with drug addicts, nicotine withdrawal, stressing over responsibility to her teen fans. As she quips,

"I remember the names of every single kid I've met/ But I forget half the people who I've gotten in bed." Even as she pays the bills for her family, she feels abandoned, admitting, "I've stared at the sky in Milwaukee and hoped that my father would finally call me."

The album's moment of bliss is the fabulously spacey country-rock romance "Finally/Beautiful Stranger." It sounds like her *A Star Is Born* cameo might have fired her up to do her own "Shallow." But it's reluctantly hopeful, as Halsey sizes up a new flame — "You got hips like Jagger and two left feet" — and surrenders to the vertigo of letting go and getting her expectations up yet again. It's a rare glimmer of optimism on an album full of pain. But Halsey makes it feel as true as every other moment on *Manic*. 

AIDAN CULLEN

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**ROLLING STONE**  
**GUIDE**

Fifty legendary years of following his cranky muse wherever it takes him – from hippie folk to country rock to grunge and beyond

By ANGIE MARTOCCIO

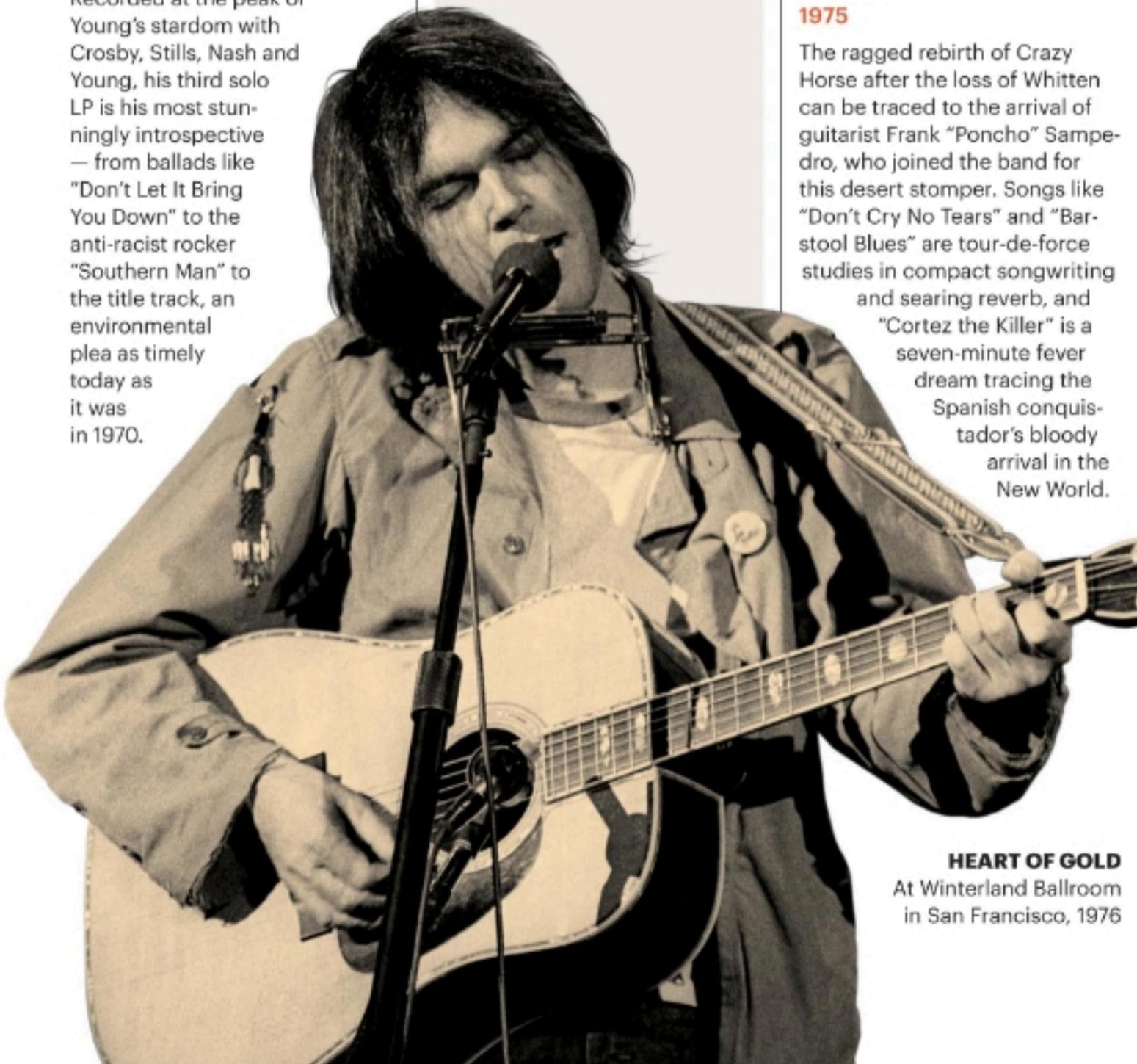
## Must-Haves



### After the Gold Rush

1970

Recorded at the peak of Young's stardom with Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, his third solo LP is his most stunningly introspective — from ballads like "Don't Let It Bring You Down" to the anti-racist rocker "Southern Man" to the title track, an environmental plea as timely today as it was in 1970.



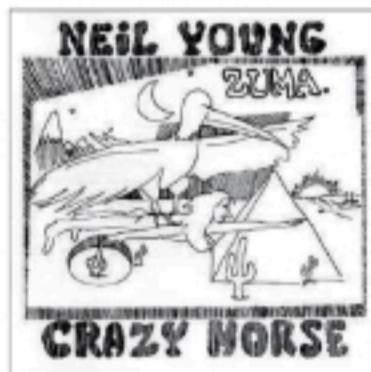
# Neil Young



### Tonight's the Night

1975

After the overdose deaths of CSNY roadie Bruce Berry and Crazy Horse guitarist Danny Whitten, Young channeled his grief into this haunted masterpiece — "a drunken Irish wake," in the words of bassist Billy Talbot. "Come on Baby Let's Go Downtown" features ghostly vocals from Whitten taped years earlier, and "Roll Another Number (For the Road)" is Young's kiss-off to the Sixties dream. "Everybody was hoping I'd turn into John Denver," he said. "That didn't happen."

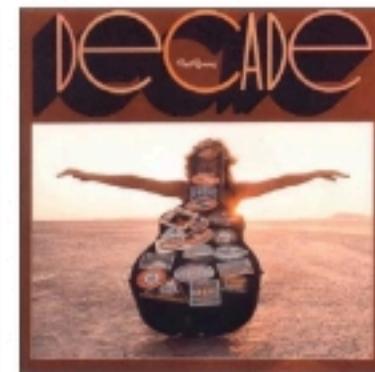


### Zuma

1975

The ragged rebirth of Crazy Horse after the loss of Whitten can be traced to the arrival of guitarist Frank "Poncho" Sampedro, who joined the band for this desert stomper. Songs like "Don't Cry No Tears" and "Barstool Blues" are tour-de-force studies in compact songwriting and searing reverb, and "Cortez the Killer" is a seven-minute fever dream tracing the Spanish conquistador's bloody arrival in the New World.

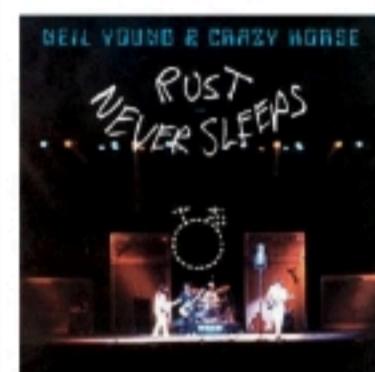
**HEART OF GOLD**  
At Winterland Ballroom  
in San Francisco, 1976



### Decade

1977

A triple-LP tour of Young's first 10 years — from Sixties flights with Buffalo Springfield ("Broken Arrow") to Crazy Horse guitar bangers ("Down by the River") to CSNY and solo hits ("Ohio," "Heart of Gold"). The inclusion of five unreleased songs (especially the yearning "Winterlong" and the Nixon-inspired "Campaigner") makes Decade one of rock's few landmark best-of records.

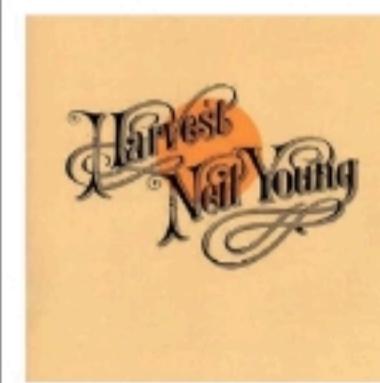


### Rust Never Sleeps

1979

Recorded live (and overdubbed in the studio), Rust Never Sleeps is Young's half-acoustic, half-grunge ode to his own restless relevance. He calls his former CSN bandmates dead weight on "Thrasher" and celebrates the Sex Pistols' Johnny Rotten on "Hey Hey, My My (Into the Black)." The highlight is "Powerfinger," a Western parable in which the pioneer hero gets his head blown off. Even Johnny Rotten never came up with anything so brilliantly twisted.

the River," and "Cowgirl in the Sand" — in a single day while battling a fever. They form the heart of his first LP with Crazy Horse, and the only one before Danny Whitten's death. Young leans heavily into psychedelic Americana and country rock, especially the funereal "Running Dry (Requiem for the Rockets)," which features Bobby Notkoff's eerie violin. Young and the band had been together for only a couple of months, but the slashing, hardscrabble looseness of "Cowgirl in the Sand" and "Down by the River" set a template for decades of grizzled noise.



### Harvest

1972

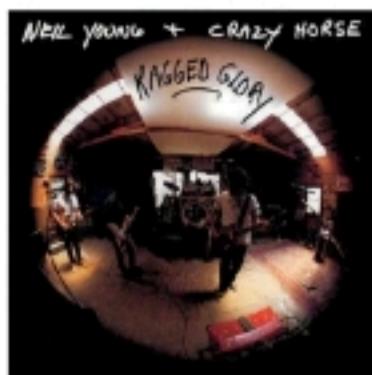
High off the success of CSNY and After the Gold Rush, Young headed to Nashville, where he hunkered down with a collection of session musicians, including pedal steel player Ben Keith, he dubbed the Stray Gators to create a country-rock sound that would loom large over the soft-rock Seventies. The track list almost reads like a greatest-hits album, including his lone Number One single, "Heart of Gold"; the wistful title track; and beloved tunes like "Old Man" and "Out on the Weekend."



### On the Beach

1974

Fueled by disillusionment and honeyslides (an intense combination of fried weed and honey), Young created his bleakest, most personal album. With assistance from the Band's Rick Danko and Levon Helm, he indulges Mansonite murder fantasies ("Revolution Blues"), looks back on his idealistic "folkie days" like they were an eternity ago ("Ambulance Blues"), and delivers one of his most wrenching breakup songs in "Motion Pictures (For Carrie)."



## Ragged Glory

1990

At the dawn of the Nineties, Young brought Crazy Horse back into the studio and made the follow-up to *Rust Never Sleeps* his patient audience had waited more than a decade to hear. From the fiery back-to-the-land opener, "Country Home," to the explosive single "Fuckin' Up" to the long, wandering solos on songs like "Over and Over" and "Love to Burn," *Ragged Glory* saw Young rediscovering tormented amps and hulking riffs. It's no wonder that the media began referring to him as the Godfather of Grunge in the years that followed.

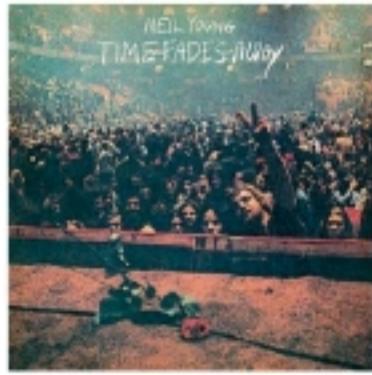


## Harvest Moon

1992

With its delicate melodies and fireside comfort, the all-acoustic *Harvest Moon* picks up musically where *Harvest* left off, except with 20 years of hard-won wisdom to draw from. "From Hank to Hendrix" is a touching, honest generational travelogue, and the title track is an ode to his wife, Pegi, that remains his most romantic song ever.

## Going Deeper



## Time Fades Away

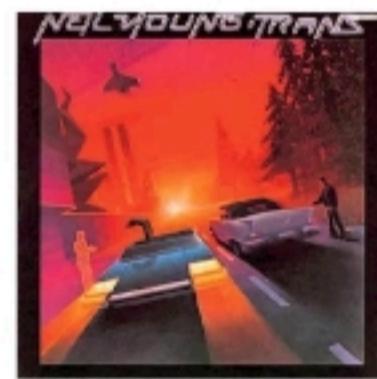
1973

Fans who scored tickets to Young's first big post-*Harvest* tour were expecting to hear hits

## Shakey, by Jimmy McDonough

Roughly 800 pages long and more than 10 years in the making, this 2002 biography is the most definitive account fans will ever have. Young allowed McDonough complete access to his professional and personal life, and the results capture his enigmatic spirit so accurately that he tried to block publication of it, resulting in a \$1.8 million lawsuit.

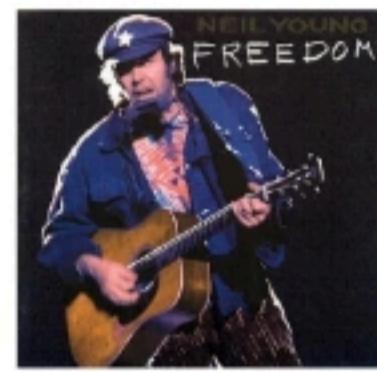
like "Heart of Gold" and "Old Man." Instead, they got a set of new songs, often about how bummed out Young was by fame. Releasing a live album from these shows as his follow-up to *Harvest* was an even weirder idea, but the result is a beautifully ornery live LP capped by the autobiographical anti-fame classic "Don't Be Denied."



## Trans

1982

Switching from guitars to synths and singing through a vocoder (which reflected his attempts to communicate with his disabled son), Young created his most divisive album, scandalizing rock fans with the techno chill of "Computer Age" and "Transformer Man." But *Trans* has aged surprisingly well, like a prehistoric version of Bon Iver or Radiohead's organic futurism.

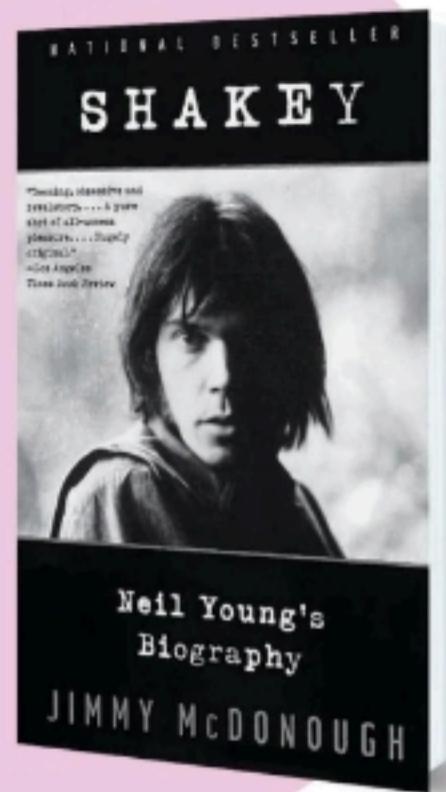


## Freedom

1989

Young spent the Eighties making inexplicably bad albums, mainly to get out of his contract with

## FURTHER READING



is his greatest album since the Nineties. The turbulent "Ramada Inn" is his own version of Bob Dylan's "Idiot Wind," a lengthy, despairing take on a collapsing marriage, and the 16-minute "Walk Like a Giant" manages to be both a thunderous epic and a sad, honest acknowledgment of his fading relevance and his generation's inability to change the world.

## Spare Parts

*More highlights from Young's massive catalog*

### "LAST TRIP TO TULSA"

Neil Young, 1969

A wonderfully puzzling psychedelic saga from his debut, complete with lines like "I've been working on this palm tree/For 87 years."

### "FOUR STRONG WINDS"

Comes a Time, 1978

Originally recorded by Canadian folk group Ian and Sylvia, this sweet cover is a highlight from Young's otherwise slept-on *Comes a Time*.

### "OPERA STAR"

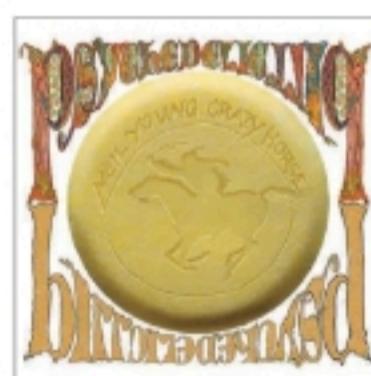
Re-actor, 1981

A rollicking opener about staying true to your destiny, it shows Young and Crazy Horse bravely entering the Eighties with one goal: "I was born to rock!"

### "TOUCH THE NIGHT"

Landing on Water, 1986

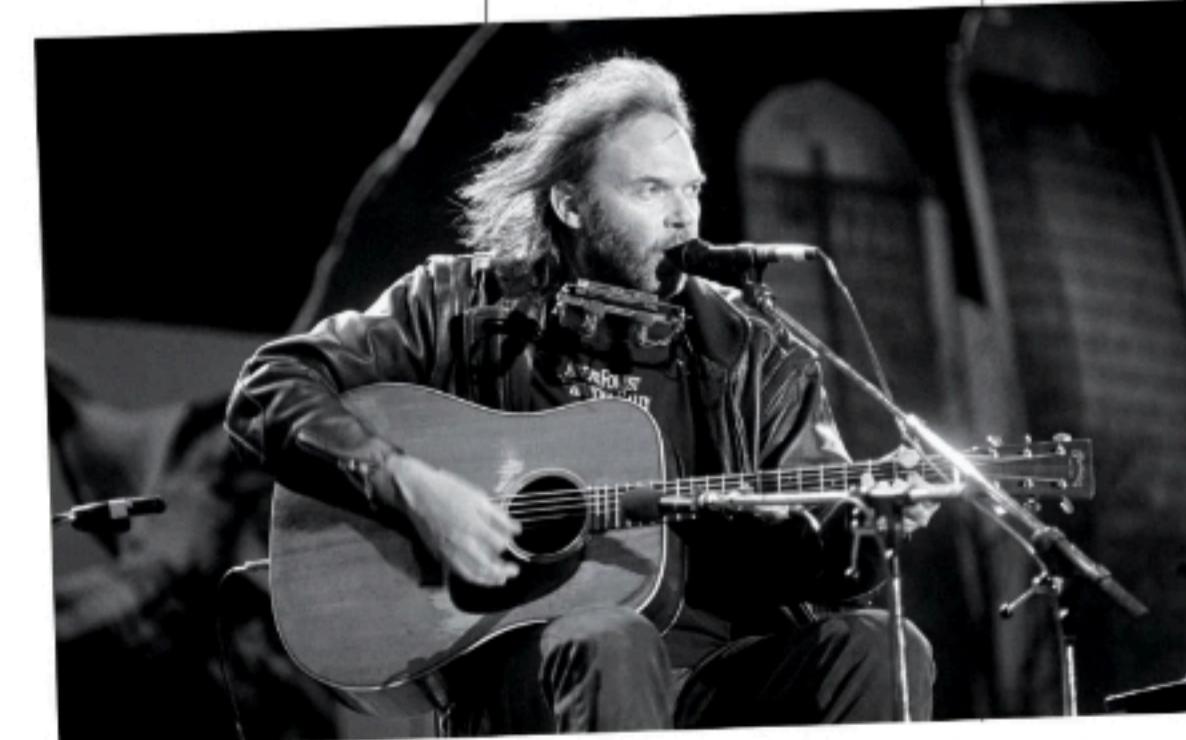
Weird Eighties Neil had his good moments, as this stormy rocker attests. The video features him as a Ron Burgundy-type TV reporter.



## Psychedelic Pill

2012

The slow-burning opener, "Driftin' Back," clocks in at nearly half an hour, and though a line like "Going to get me a hip-hop haircut" showcases just how lovably out of touch he feels in the 21st century, *Psychedelic Pill*



NEVER FADE  
Young at Farm Aid in 1993

### "I'M THE OCEAN"

Mirror Ball, 1995

A mass of distorted riffs and defiant lyrics. It's fitting that Young sings, "People my age, they don't do the things I do," backed by his young pals Pearl Jam.

### "RAZOR LOVE"

Silver & Gold, 2000

A delicate sequel of sorts to *Harvest Moon*'s "Such a Woman," from the acoustic *Silver & Gold*, it frees Young to profess his love to wife Pegi over subtle percussion and harmonica.

### "GOIN' HOME"

Are You Passionate?, 2002

The highlight of this odd soul record is the lone Crazy Horse track. Young tears through tumultuous lines about American Indians and battle drums over Sampedro's sizzling guitar.

### "BE THE RAIN"

Greendale, 2003

This catchy, Earth-conscious tune glides along with backing vocals by Pegi Young and the Mountainettes, who sing, "Save the planet for another day!" as Neil echoes, "Hey, Big Oil, what do you say?"

### "THE RESTLESS CONSUMER"

Living With War, 2006

His blazing Bush-era screed, centered around the chant "Don't need no more lies," it reaffirms the political passion Young showed on CSNY's "Ohio," which has only deepened over the decades.

### "PEACE TRAIL"

Paradox, 2018

An ode to his own enduring spirit, with country rockers Promise of the Real. "I ain't taken my last hit," he sings with campfire intimacy. Thank God for that.



**HERO WORSHIP**  
The year's marquee series featured flawed but fierce protagonists, from (left to right) *Fleabag*'s titular heroine (Waller-Bridge), with "hot priest" Scott) to *Russian Doll*'s Nadia (Lyonne) and *Better Things*' Sam (Adlon).

# 10 BEST SHOWS OF 2019

*In a year of remarkable TV, these are the series we just couldn't shake*



ALAN SEPINWALL

## 1. *Fleabag*

Amazon Prime Video

The second season of Phoebe Waller-Bridge's tragic farce began with her face covered in blood. It ended with her gently waving goodbye to us – her invisible, silent confidants. The wave proved the far more powerful moment. That seemed about right for this season, which was as much about the relationship between fictional characters and their audiences as it was about *Fleabag*'s attempt to repair things with her estranged sister Claire (Sian Clifford), or grappling with her feelings for a hot priest (Andrew Scott). Season Two con-

tinued to break the fourth wall – then broke it twice over when the priest (who has his own invisible, all-knowing confidant in God) began to notice *Fleabag* talking to us – in a way that laced Waller-Bridge's sterling comic delivery with something more bittersweet. *Fleabag* joked with us because she had no one else who would listen. The series' original six-episode run in 2016 was so perfect and seemingly complete that its return could have felt like an unnecessary cash-in. Instead, *Fleabag* gave us the rare sequel that surpassed the original, going deeper and sadder, but also more explosively funny than ever. (That opening episode revealed the source of *Fleabag*'s bloody nose with astonishing comic precision, winning Emmys for Waller-Bridge – as actress and writer – and ace director Harry Bradbeer along the way.) That farewell wave suggested *Fleabag* finally realized she had to focus more on her side of the barrier between reality and fiction, and that we would thus

never see her again. If so, what an incredible way to go.

## 2. *Watchmen* HBO

If *Fleabag* was a small story told spectacularly, then *Watchmen* – Damon Lindelof's reinvention of the landmark Eighties comic about how superheroes might function in the real world – was a spectacle that turned out to be an occasionally messy but always riveting story. Lindelof's take ingeniously mixed characters and stories from the comic with the ongoing American problem of white supremacy, from the Tulsa, Oklahoma, race massacre of 1921 to a fictionalized Klan offshoot modeling itself on *Watchmen* vigilante Rorschach. There were cops (the fire-breathing Regina King) with costumed superhero identities, former vigilantes (the marvelously dry Jean Smart) working for the FBI, and some indecipherable but hilarious lunacy involving ex-hero Adrian Veidt (Jeremy Irons, having a blast) on... a moon of Jupiter? With servants



**DARK NIGHT**

King as her *Watchmen* character Angela Abar's vigilante alter ego, Sister Night

who are clones? Part national nightmare, part cosmic odyssey, backed by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross' hypnotic score, *Watchmen* was as enormous a swing as the comic, and one that hit staggeringly hard each time it connected.

## 3. *Russian Doll*

Netflix

Sweet birthday, baby! This metaphysical comedy co-created by (along with Amy Poehler and Leslie Headland) and starring *Orange Is the New Black*'s Natasha Lyonne was both a high-concept mystery and an intimate character study. As Lyonne's Nadia found herself dying and being reborn again and again on the night of her 36th birthday party, *Russian Doll* bent, folded, and rearranged its *Groundhog Day*-esque conceit until it felt like something thrillingly new. Some deaths were heartbreaking, others hysterical, as an increasingly exasperated Nadia tried to figure out why this was happening to her – and to a depressed introvert (Charlie Barnett) who was her spiritual opposite – and Lyonne's performance was never

less than a hurricane of charisma. Live. Die. Wisecrack. Repeat.

#### 4. **Better Things** FX

The first two seasons of this remarkably intimate story of single mother Sam Fox (Pamela Adlon) raising three daughters were made in creative partnership between Adlon (who based much of it on her own life) and Louis C.K. Then C.K. was exposed as a serial sexual harasser and ousted from the series. *Better Things* not only survived without the man who had written or co-written every previous episode, but thrived. Season Three still had that intoxicating sense of place and feeling, where long stretches would pass without the need for anything resembling a conventional story. But Adlon and her new collaborators also proved splendid at incorporating more traditional plots about Sam's acting career and romantic life (including the liveliest performance Matthew Broderick has given in forever, as Sam's shrink-turned-boyfriend), even as her primary interest – and the series' – remained how she parents her girls. A show to experience more than to watch, and lovelier than ever.

#### 5. **Unbelievable** Netflix

"No one ever accuses a robbery victim of lying," an attorney notes late in this miniseries. "But when it comes to sexual assault?" Based on an award-winning ProPublica investigation, *Unbelievable* told two parallel but ultimately linked stories about rape, one deliberately agonizing to sit through, the other a gripping thriller. In the former, a young woman (*Booksmart*'s Kaitlyn Dever) reported her assault, was treated skeptically by family, friends, and police, and was ultimately pressured to recant. In the latter, two cops (Meritt Wever and Toni Collette) from neighboring towns realized their investigations might involve the same rapist and that they might have a serial predator on their hands. By exploring the subject from so many angles at once – and casting three superb actors in the central roles – *Unbelievable* functioned as both propulsive drama and an exhaustive discussion of why rape investigations can feel

as traumatic to survivors as the rapes themselves.

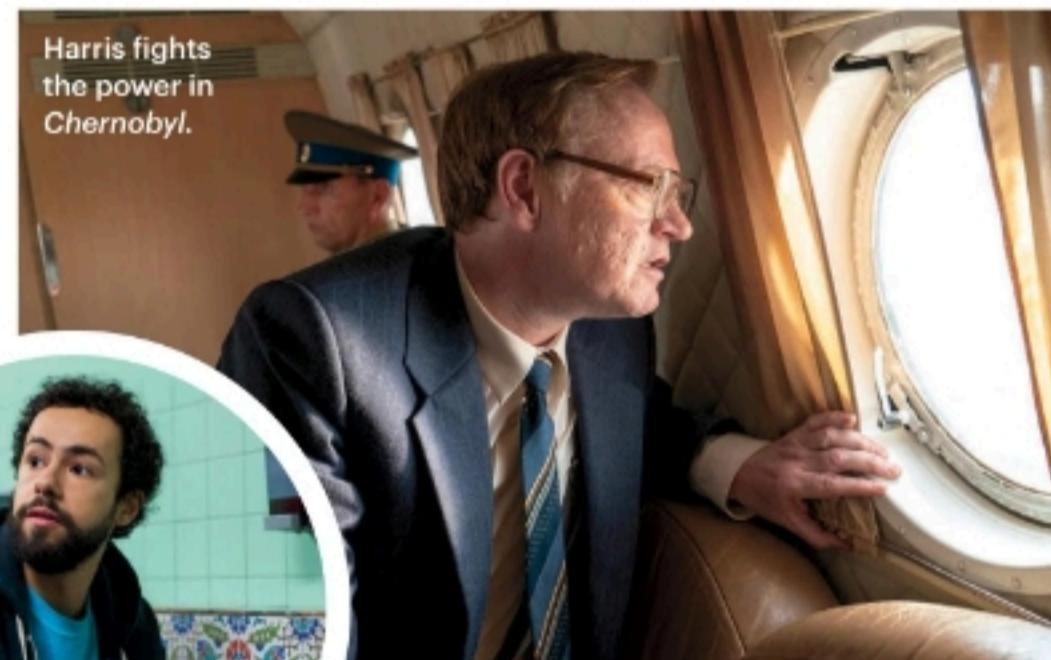
#### 6. **Chernobyl** HBO

Where *Unbelievable* made its grueling subject matter watchable by framing much of itself as a police procedural, *Chernobyl* nimbly looked at its own tragedy – the 1986 meltdown of a Soviet nuclear reactor – through the lens of competence porn. Written by Craig Mazin and directed by Johan Renck, the miniseries

blunt and dark examination of economic life in an America that's increasingly leaving too many people behind. But it was somehow also a ridiculous and warm tale of how these same people found strength and reason for optimism in their bonds. In the same way, you can choose to look on its cancellation after two low-rated seasons as another Peak TV sob story. Or you can consider the very existence of such a strange and specific show



*Pose* stats spark joy.



Harris fights the power in *Chernobyl*.



didn't flinch on the graphic horrors the meltdown visited on its first responders, nor on the institutionalized Soviet stubbornness that allowed it to happen. But its primary area of interest was the many scientists (represented by a chilling Jared Harris), miners, and others who put themselves at tremendous personal risk to find creative ways to prevent a local catastrophe from mushrooming into a global one. Nightmarish and inspiring in one compact, five-episode package.

#### 7. **Lodge 49** AMC

This quirky series about the struggling members of a local fraternal order was an incredi-

one of the many miracles of this topsy-turvy television age, and take solace that we got as much time as we did to enjoy endearing performances by, among others, Wyatt Russell, Brent Jennings, Sonya Cassidy, and, this season (as a bestselling author with a zest for life and an unfortunate habit of diving through plate-glass windows), producer-guest star Paul Giamatti.

#### 8. **Ramy** Hulu

Even more than race, religion seems to be the third rail that few modern TV series are willing to touch. This dramedy, co-created by and starring comedian Ramy Youssef, focused almost entirely on its title character's faith. Ramy, an assimilated young man living in suburban New Jersey

with his Egyptian-immigrant parents, decided he wanted to be a better Muslim – if only the increasingly complex demands of modern American life would let him. The series' first season explored this challenge in ways that could be funny or poignant, but were always thoughtful and empathetic. Several episodes – a flashback to young Ramy in the days after 9/11, or the attempt by Ramy's lonely mother (Hiam Abbass) to meet people by becoming a Lyft driver – will linger long after you've watched them.



## THE YEAR'S BIGGEST LETDOWNS

### **Game of Thrones** (HBO)

Other than the episode where Brienne was knighted, the final season was an utter mess that at times (the all-night battle) was literally unwatchable.

### **The Politician** (Netflix)

Where *Pose* gave us Ryan Murphy at his sincere best, this would-be satire starring *Dear Evan Hansen*'s Ben Platt was him at his glib worst.

### **Catch-22** (Hulu)

George Clooney and friends assembled an impressive cast for an adaptation of Joseph Heller's classic anti-war novel that lost all of Heller's biting humor along the way.

### **9. *Pose*** FX

Have tissues handy – not because terrible things will happen to the show's many LGBTQ characters, but because, mercifully, so often they won't. Where so much of modern TV drama – including several other shows by *Pose* co-creator Ryan Murphy – trends toward making characters suffer, this series about Eighties ball culture recognized that its brown and queer protagonists don't need any added burdens for their lives to be inherently dramatic. Season Two offered its occasional tragedies, but so many of its most potent scenes – including the surprising face turn of Season One villain Elektra (Dominique Jackson) and health crises for both Blanca (Mj Rodriguez) and Pray Tell (Emmy winner Billy Porter, amazing) – involved people getting a break at the exact moment they so desperately needed one.

### **10. *David Makes Man*** OWN

The Oprah Winfrey-led OWN has had impressive series before, like family saga *Queen Sugar*, but this coming-of-age drama from *Moonlight* co-writer Tarell Alvin McCraney felt like a creative leap above even those. Following a 14-year-old (an achingly vulnerable Akili McDowell) as he moved between his threadbare life in a housing project and his days at a magnet school for gifted children, every frame of the series was soaking in David's desperate need to feel safe and comfortable anywhere. But even as *David Makes Man* stared down the complications and dangers of its young hero's life, it also found imaginative, even fun ways to get inside his worried head – just as all the shows on this list wormed their way into ours. ☀

# Movies



## 10 BEST MOVIES OF 2019

*In the mix: Mobsters, Korean teens, big stars, little women, and a Joker*



PETER TRAVERS

### 1. *The Irishman*

Martin Scorsese, 77, and still America's greatest living filmmaker, shook up the year by claiming Marvel movies aren't cinema. "What's not there is revelation, mystery, or genuine emotional danger," claimed the director, who supplies all that and more in what is not just the best film of 2019 but also an incendiary, indelible summation of a landmark career. The film reunites Scorsese with his peerless acting muses Robert De Niro

and Joe Pesci nearly 25 years after they made *Casino*. It also brings in a live-wire Al Pacino as Jimmy Hoffa, the Teamsters leader who De Niro's hit man, Frank Sheeran, is ordered to kill. A digital de-aging process allows the actors to appear younger as the film spans decades of American history. But it's not violence that brings them down – it's debilitating age. That searing note of poetic justice makes *The Irishman* unique among Scorsese's Mob films, from *Goodfellas* to *The Departed*, and earns a place in the cinematic canon as an enduring work of art.

### 2. *Once Upon a Time... in Hollywood*

Quentin Tarantino's mad love for Hollywood on the fringes permeates every frame of this richly detailed, ravishingly told fable. The time is 1969, and something sinister is creeping into Tinseltown. Who else but Tarantino would dare make a buddy com-

edy with the murderous Manson family lurking in the background? Leonardo DiCaprio works wonders as a boozing, fading star reduced to playing TV villains and leaning hard for support on his stunt-double buddy (Brad Pitt, heading for his first Oscar). And, yes, living next door is actress Sharon Tate, a personification of innocence as played by Margot Robbie. As is his habit, the virtuoso who had Hitler killed in *Inglour-*

**LEADERS OF THE PACK**  
Clockwise, from top left: *The Irishman* (Pesci and De Niro); Jojo Rabbit (Waititi and Griffin Davis); *Once Upon a Time... in Hollywood* (DiCaprio and Pitt); *Parasite* (Park So-dam, Choi Woo-sik)

rious Basterds adjusts history to suit his own moral compass. To paraphrase a line from the script: He's Quentin fucking Tarantino and don't you forget it. This funny and ferocious pop fantasia is pure cinematic bliss.

### 3. *Parasite*

Give thanks to filmmaker Bong Joon-ho, the South Korean master whose game-changing *Parasite* seems to be curing America's aversion to subtitles. As the financially struggling Kim family stealthily infiltrates the home of the wealthy Parks by securing posts as tutors – and then posing as servants – the film builds from a stinging comic social satire about class into a horror show that indict the parasitic nature of greed across all borders. Bong's technique is blindingly brilliant – you watch the film marshal its forces in awe. If you haven't seen *Parasite* yet, drop everything and do it.



#### 4. Marriage Story

Charlie (Adam Driver) and Nicole (Scarlett Johansson) are made for each other. But she wants to move to L.A., and he wants to stay in New York. Their eight-year-old son, Henry (Azhy Robertson), occupies the scorched earth between them. Out of the million things that can lead to divorce, writer-director Noah Baumbach crafts his finest film yet, a series of scenes from a marriage that you can't help taking personally. With Driver at his best and Johansson at hers, you'll laugh and cry, sometimes at the same time.

#### 5. Little Women

It's a thrill to watch writer-director Greta Gerwig (*Lady Bird*) tackle the prospect of holy wedlock as an unholy burden. It sure is for Jo (Saoirse Ronan), the firebrand and fledgling author among the four March sisters, who occupy the plot of Louisa May Alcott's 1860s novel. Sisters Meg (Emma Watson) and Beth (Eliza Scanlen) bear witness as Amy (the marvelous Florence Pugh) challenges Jo at her own game. Of the eight film versions of *Little Women*, Gerwig's is by far the best. She brings Alcott's own life and rebellious streak into the mix and creates an exhilarating gift of a movie that honors female independence at any age. Little? Not these women. Gerwig frees them to rise up and roar.

#### 6. 1917

A potent and prodigious achievement on every level. Director Sam Mendes and camera visionary Roger Deakins – both their talents shining on their highest beams – have set out to tell a World War I story that propels itself forward in one continuous take. Or at least it looks that way as two young British soldiers – Schofield (George MacKay) and Blake (Dean-Charles Chapman) – take on the impossible mission of crossing enemy lines to deliver a message that the Germans are setting a trap that could cost the British army more than 1,600 lives. There's nothing gimmicky about the approach of Mendes and Deakins, who perform technical miracles that are surpassed only by their deep emotional investment (MacKay's turn is a heartbreaker) in a high-tension war film that succeeds in pinning you to your seat.

#### 7. Jojo Rabbit

New Zealand filmmaker Taika Waititi is a wild man (see *What We Do in the Shadows*, *Thor: Ragnarok*) who doesn't scare off easily. And the polarizing *Jojo Rabbit* is his biggest swing yet, a comedy tangled in tragedy, in which Waititi plays Hitler for laughs. What happens when 10-year-old Jojo (a terrific Roman Griffin Davis) tries to reconcile his membership in the Hitler Youth with the Jewish girl (*Leave No Trace*'s Thomasin McKenzie)



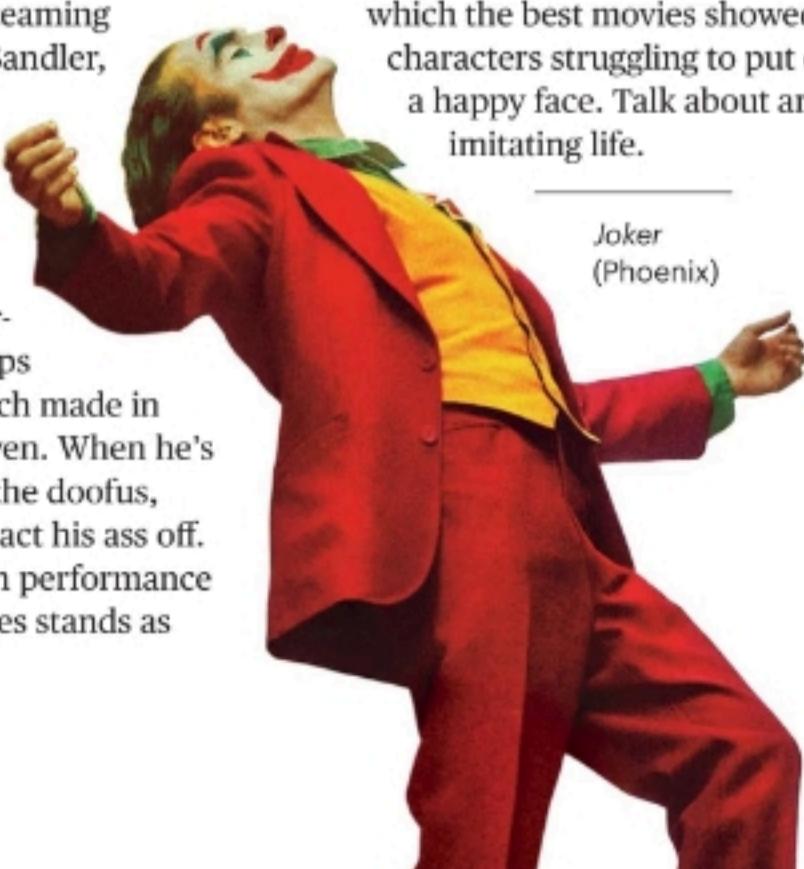
his mother (Scarlett Johansson) is hiding at home? Waititi trusts that his young hero's journey to empathy will also be ours. And in a world still consumed by divisiveness and hate crimes, let's hope he's right.

#### 8. Uncut Gems

The Safdie brothers, Josh and Benny, make movies in a fever – and their teaming with Adam Sandler, as a New York jeweler risking his life on a rare opal and an all-or-nothing hoops bet, is a match made in red-hot heaven. When he's not playing the doofus, Sandler can act his ass off. And his all-in performance for the Safdies stands as Exhibit A.

#### 9. The Farewell

A tough core of intelligence and wit marks writer-director Lulu Wang's tale of cultural conflict. Awkwafina brings a touching gravity to Billi, a New York writer who returns home to China to see her dying grandmother Nai Nai (the sublime Shuzhen Zhao). Chinese custom says the cancer diagnosis should be withheld from Nai Nai. Billi pushes for truth. That's the debate at the center of a film whose grace notes are only strengthened by its grit.



#### 10. Joker

In a performance that will be dissected for years, Joaquin Phoenix astounds as Arthur Fleck, a street clown and wanna-be stand-up who morphs into a brutal avenger. Creating their own stand-alone Joker origin story, Phoenix and director Todd Phillips hit a mother lode of controversy about the violence in a film that became the most successful R-rated movie in history. For inspiration, the filmmakers looked to Martin Scorsese, the legend at the top of this list. And in Fleck, you can see tormented traces of Travis Bickle in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, and Rupert Pupkin in *The King of Comedy*. *The Irishman* and *Joker* bookend a year in which the best movies showed characters struggling to put on a happy face. Talk about art imitating life.

Joker  
(Phoenix)

## THE 10 WORST

JUST DON'T



### BOX-OFFICE WINNERS & LOSERS

**Marvel Is Still Top Gun**  
*Avengers: Endgame*  
\$858 million  
*Captain Marvel*  
\$427 million  
*Spider-Man: Far From Home*  
\$391 million

**Surprise Stumbles**  
*Dark Phoenix*  
\$66 million (the lowest-grossing entry in the X-Men series)  
*Terminator: Dark Fate*  
\$60 million for the return of Ah-nuld and Linda Hamilton — a dark fate, indeed

**Great Reviews/Zip Box Office**  
*Booksmart*  
\$23 million. WTF, people?!

**Hit the Horror Jackpot**  
*Us*  
\$175 million, confirming that *Get Out*'s Jordan Peele is still the king of scares with smarts

#### 1. THE LION KING

Jon Favreau's photo-realistic rip-off of Disney's 1994 animated classic reps a toxic trend — it's a corporate product minus heart, soul, and any hint of originality.

#### 2. THE KITCHEN

Melissa McCarthy, Elisabeth Moss, and Tiffany Haddish bury their talents in a misbegotten Seventies mobster movie that's a true criminal offense.

#### 3. GEMINI MAN

Oscar winner Ang Lee gets so caught up in making Will Smith a digitalized younger version of himself that he forgets to craft a watchable movie.

#### 4. THE GOLDFINCH

Arguably the worst literary adaptation in decades. Donna Tartt's novel and an all-star cast go down in flames.

#### 5. WHERE'D YOU GO, BERNADETTE

Even Cate Blanchett and director Richard Linklater can't energize this lifeless take on Maria Semple's joyous book.

#### 6. THE DEAD DON'T DIE

Indie-film giant Jim Jarmusch never screws up. This DOA zombie comedy with Bill Murray and Adam Driver says he can. What happened?

#### 7. 21 BRIDGES

Chadwick Boseman shuts down New York to catch drug dealers and dirty cops. Too bad he didn't shut down this no-thrills thriller instead.

#### 8. MIDWAY

Roland Emmerich depicts this crucial World War II naval battle by bombing us with cardboard characters and phony FX.

#### 9. GLASS

What happens when M. Night Shyamalan jams *Split* and *Unbreakable* into one film? An incoherent, god-awful mess.

#### 10. LAST CHRISTMAS

Justice demands oblivion for this indigestible blend of holiday rom-com and ghost story with zero-chemistry lovers (Emilia Clarke, Henry Golding) and zero reason to exist. P.T.

# Books.

## Janis: Her Life and Music

Holly George-Warren

Rock's woman superstar gets the biography her music and pathfinding, free-spirited bravery deserve. Veteran music historian George-Warren is especially attentive to Joplin's "pioneering instincts" as a vocalist and bandleader, and the late singer's own voice comes to life in hopeful, at times heartbreak, letters she wrote to her family in Texas. *Janis* completes our image of a singer whose story was long obscured by wild-hippie myth.

## Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young

David Browne

ROLLING STONE senior writer Browne chronicles the tumultuous five-decade history of the beloved supergroup. Every feud and drug escapade is accounted for, as well as awesome lesser-known anecdotes like C, S, and N's frosty 1977 session in a Miami mansion, where they sometimes only crossed paths during late-night solo raids on the fridge.

## Revenge of the She-Punks

Vivien Goldman

Goldman, an NYU adjunct professor who chronicled the London punk explosion in the Seventies, tells the fascinating tale of how feminist punk evolved. She hits the thrift shops with Patti Smith, hangs in Jamaica with Grace Jones, and meets young riot grrrls from Olympia, Washington, to Indonesia to Colombia. It's a decades-long story full of radical women making their own noise.

## Me

Elton John

Elton's long-awaited memoir may be short on details on his music, but it is heavy on revelations about his traumatic childhood, his years as a hopeless drug



## THE BEST MUSIC BOOKS OF 2019

*Elton's revealing memoir, Flea's early days, feminist punk, tragic blues, a love letter to Tribe, and more*



addict, and a recent near-fatal bout with prostate cancer. And even familiar stories, like his U.S. debut at the Troubadour in Los Angeles, are brought to life like never before, thanks to Elton's wit, candor, and remarkable memory.

## Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to A Tribe Called Quest

Hanif Abdurraqib

The poet and critic's love letter to his favorite hip-hop crew is a deeply moving journal of fandom, death, grief, and growing up. Abdurraqib reflects on what it means to love a group and to see your most private

struggles in their ups and downs. "I imagine the low end to be a bass line that rattles your teeth," he writes. "But I also consider the low end to be the smell of someone you once loved coming back to you."

## Acid for the Children

Flea

Flea's memoir is a warm coming-of-age epic, the self-aware chronicle of an Australian ex-pat landing in the U.S. just in time for the Summer of Love and his parents' separation. Ending just as the Red Hot Chili Peppers are getting started, it's also a sweet bromance born between two teenagers, Flea and Anthony

Kiedis, who'd become BFFs and eventually take over the world.

## Guitar King: Michael Bloomfield's Life in the Blues

David Dann

A guitar hero who never wanted to be one, Bloomfield was a white Jewish kid of enormous talent who played on Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" and at his war-cry electric set at the Newport Folk Festival. But Bloomfield hated stardom, and what unfolds is the story of a genius "relegated to footnote status" by a self-sabotaging streak Dann lays out in tragic, vivid detail.

## Bruce Springsteen: The Stories Behind the Songs

Brian Hiatt

ROLLING STONE senior writer Hiatt dives deep into Springsteen's artistic process. New interviews with much of the E Street Band and various producers, engineers, and session musicians reveal fascinating nuggets, many unknown to even the most diehard fanatics.

## This Searing Light, the Sun and Everything Else

Jon Savage

Joy Division's story never stops tearing us apart. Veteran U.K. journalist Savage, who covered the band in the 1970s, uses three decades of interviews to compile this oral history. It's a portrait of four working-class lads from Manchester, England, who rose out of the 1970s punk scene to remake the world with their industrial-wasteland sound.

## High School

Tegan and Sara

Indie-pop twin sisters Tegan and Sara chose to write their memoir by alternating authorship between chapters, allowing them to render their pre-fame teenage years as a conversation on growing up in the Nineties, discovering songwriting, finding love, and eventually coming out as gay in conservative Canada. It's a quietly heroic rock & roll origin story unlike any other.



### DARK STARS

Clockwise, from top: Janis Joplin in 1970, the year she died; Grace Jones, who appears in Goldman's book; Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young taking rock back to the land in 1970; Flea playing with the Chili Peppers in 2016.

CONTRIBUTORS: DAVID BROWNE, JON DOLAN, ANDY GREENE, WILL HERMES, ANGIE MARZOCCIO, AND ROB SHEFFIELD

## → JASON FLOM

[Cont. from 31] Later that night, the art-filled apartment he shares with his English bulldog (and “glowing orb of unconditional love”) Lulu had provided a crash pad for Michelle Murphy, exonerated after 20 years in prison for the gruesome murder of her infant, an act that even the judge had admitted everyone knew she didn’t do. When Murphy, then 17, went to jail mere hours after finding her son’s body, she was offered no mental-health services; when she got released, at age 37, her daughter had been adopted and raised by another family, and she’d never met her granddaughter. Murphy didn’t even know how to use a cellphone. “[My friend] handed one to me and it was ringing, and I was like, ‘What do I do?’” Murphy says. “He took it and swiped it and handed it to me, and I’m talking to it upside down.”

The ex-con that Flom is closest to is probably Noura Jackson, an only child wrongfully accused of killing her single mother, at age 18. Shortly after she got offered an Alford plea, at age 29, Flom had her on the podcast, then decided to unofficially adopt her. “I felt like the universe was tapping me on the shoulder and going, ‘Hey, schmuck, are you going to take care of this child? Because no one else is doing it.’” Flom first checked with his two grown children. “How would you feel about having a sister?” he asked. Then, with their blessing, he helped Jackson move to New York, got her enrolled in college (“I congratulate her when she gets good grades, which she does”), and took on the slightly hovering role of a dad, needling her about when she’s going to get a boyfriend and why she’s not wearing a heavier coat. All of this

seems perfectly reasonable to Flom, who carefully vets which convictions he’ll publicize as wrongful. “I have a family of exonerees,” he says. “Michelle Murphy is like a niece to me. Amanda Knox is like my little sister. J.J. is like a brother.”

J.J., or Jon-Adrian Velazquez – the subject of the *Dateline* documentary *Conviction*, which outlines how he was wrongfully convicted of murdering a former cop in 1998 – is the person we’re at Sing Sing to visit today. He’s been incarcerated 22 years and is up for parole in three, but Flom knows all too well how being innocent can actually work against you. “You go in front of the parole board, and you have to express your remorse and say, ‘Oh, I’m so sorry for the crime I didn’t commit.’ Rarely do they grant parole for someone who doesn’t acknowledge their remorse and their responsibility,” says Flom, who has been in touch with New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo personally about trying to get clemency for Velazquez.

In a closet of a room off the main visiting area, he and Flom embrace deeply before Velazquez introduces Flom to Bruce Bryant, charged at 23 with a drug-related homicide and then convicted when a famously crooked prosecutor (who ended up going to jail himself for prosecutorial misconduct) apparently gave someone a secret deal to testify against him. Today just so happens to be Bryant’s 50th birthday, and he’s still mired in a seemingly endless string of appeals. Flom listens to his story (he knows all about the crooked prosecutor already), then suggests that Bryant come on the podcast. Finally, he asks the question he asks every innocent person he meets in prison: “After all this time, are you bitter?”

“No,” Bryant tells him. “I’m not bitter at the world.”

“But there’s a clot in the American justice system,” Velazquez adds. “There are no answers. It’s just the way the system is.”

“Of all the people you’ve met in prison, what percentage do you think are innocent?” asks Flom.

“I’d say about seven or eight percent,” replies Bryant. He nods toward his friend, who he met in part because they both spent so much time in the law library, trying to figure out how to prove their innocence and set themselves free. “You meet some of the best people in some of the worst places sometimes,” Bryant says.

Flom concurs. Back outside the prison walls, he looks to the Hudson River, gray and foreboding beneath the pounding rain. Then he slides his narrow, black-clad frame behind the wheel of his car and throws it in reverse. He’s running late to a lunch with a billionaire who Flom thinks might put some real money behind all these ventures. But honestly, the prisoners themselves come first.

“They all have that crazy lack of bitterness you just saw,” he says of the wrongfully convicted people who he knows. “They all have that will to live. If you go through an ordeal like that, you can either let it take over your life and destroy you – and I’m sure a lot of people do, because who could stand the fucking deprivation and everything else they go through – or you find this fucking inner something that these people have, which is what’s so intoxicating about being around them. They’ve figured out the meaning of life.”

The rain pitter-pats on the windshield, and the highway curves gently before us. “I mean,” Flom says. “There’s nothing I would rather be doing with my time.”

# Rolling Stone

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## → INSTAGRAM MURDER

[Cont. from 41] Bianca on Discord in 2016. It is also predominantly male, which means that girls on /r9k/ often garner large followings in a short amount of time. These girls tend to share similar characteristics: They are slender, round-eyed, and overwhelmingly white, with a fondness for cosplay and/or Japanese- or Korean-inspired fashion. (They are frequently referred to as “egirls,” a term that describes an anime aesthetic, but more often than not is used in a derogatory, sexualized context.)

Perhaps above all else, however, the popular girls on /r9k/ have two major things in common: They tend to struggle with mental illness, and they tend to be very, very young. “A lot of us get roped into it when we’re 13, 14,” says Bianca’s online friend Chloe Frazier. “Because we’re so lonely in real life and have issues that prevent us from being socially fulfilled in other ways, we stay in these communities. And it’s hard for us to get out.”

Despite their young age, many of these girls attract older male devotees, or “orbiters,” who “worship younger girls,” says Erica Rose, one of Bianca’s online friends who also frequented /r9k/. “They idolize them, and they become obsessed with them.” Often, orbiters will send girls gifts, money, or drugs, usually expecting some form of attention or, at the very least, nude photos in return. If the girl does anything that somehow deviates from an orbiter’s perception of her, the retaliation is dramatic, usually involving her being doxxed or her nudes being leaked. Some girls told me about orbiters threatening them with violence, or arriving at their homes unannounced. One girl told me that an orbiter called in a mass-shooting threat to her school. For these young women, “being engaged in these communities is an ego boost,” says Citarella. “But it’s also a kind of self-harm.”

Bianca, in particular, was well-known for engaging with her orbiters. “She was too nice to ignore people like that,” says Chloe, “even too nice sometimes.”

Bianca tended to leave doors open online that should have stayed shut. Another ex-boyfriend (we’ll call him Rob), who asked to remain anonymous due to potential legal issues, says they met in early 2017 on 4chan’s /soc/ board, a forum for meetups and hookups. “I was fucking lonely,” says Rob, who was 18 to Bianca’s 15. “She was lonely too.” Within a week, he says, Bianca asked Rob to be her boyfriend. They dated on and off for the next two years.

In August 2017, Bianca ran away to Long Island, where Rob lived. By tracking Bianca’s phone activity and enlisting the help of a private investigator, Kim was able to track her down. Kim says when Bianca found out that police were looking for her, she attempted to run in front of a car, which led to her being institutionalized at a mental-health facility in Nassau County for five days.

According to Kim, Bianca’s friends, and Rob himself, Bianca and Rob had a toxic relationship. Rob struggled with substance abuse and bipolar disorder, and the two “would feed off each other,” Kim says. She and Bianca’s friends also accused Rob of stalking Bianca, attempting to access her social media accounts, and showing up at her door unannounced. (Rob denies stalking her, and says that Bianca gave him the passwords to her accounts.)

That winter, Bianca broke up with Rob after he accused her of messaging other guys. According to Bianca’s online friends, he retaliated by sending people on Discord sexually explicit content featuring

him and Bianca – who was 15 at the time it was shot – without her consent. (He admits to posting the content, though claims he thought Bianca was going to share it as well.) Bianca showed screenshots to her mother, and the two reported Rob to the police. Later, after Rob threatened suicide, Bianca refused to cooperate with the investigation. “She wasn’t making decisions that made sense,” Kim says.

Despite Rob’s actions, Bianca kept running away to be with him: According to Utica police, Kim filed at least three missing-person reports for her daughter between August 2017 and June 2018. When asked why Bianca kept returning to him, Rob says simply: “She was very lonely, and she didn’t really have anybody at the time. I was like the only option, lesser of two evils. She could be alone or be with me.”

Around this time, Kim says, Bianca told one of her mental-health counselors that she had fantasized about going to a parking garage and jumping off the roof. She was subsequently placed in Pinefield, a psychiatric facility in Utica, for a month. By all accounts, Bianca enjoyed her time in Pinefield; her family brought her pizza and wings, and she was considered popular within the facility. “She actually said, ‘This is the first time in years that I feel like I have friends,’ ” Kim says. But not long after Bianca was released, she left home to be with Rob again.

Unable to keep her daughter from running away, Kim placed Bianca on a Persons in Need of Supervision hold, with a judge ordering her to wear an ankle monitor and be placed on house arrest. In a video Kim showed me, of Bianca singing “Can’t Help Falling in Love” and playing the ukulele to Rimmer’s toddler daughter, you can see the ankle monitor peeking out from under her jeans. In June 2018, she violated the PINS order by cutting off her ankle monitor and running away again.

By October 2018, Bianca was moved to St. Anne Institute, a residential-placement facility in Albany. All told, she spent most of 2018 away from her family. Kim says that St. Anne was “the best thing that ever happened” to Bianca. She found a counselor she liked, and she’d started a type of cognitive behavioral therapy aimed at reducing suicidal ideation and self-destructive behaviors. And Bianca seemed to feel the same way. In one Mother’s Day Instagram post, Bianca Photoshopped herself into family photos, thanking Rimmer and Kim for being there for her while she was away. “I’ve learned so much, and I appreciate you more now, than I ever have,” she wrote. “[I] hope I can make you both proud of me. I’m doing my best for both of you, because I love you two.”

In February 2019, Bianca came home, returning to Proctor and ultimately graduating from high school. By all accounts, including her own, Bianca’s mental health had exponentially improved. “I really have been happier and just doing generally better,” she said in May 2019 on the Q&A app Tellonym. “I’m almost 18 and I look at myself 2 years ago and I’m like, Damn.” She was looking forward to college, and she eventually wanted to transfer to a school in New York City. “She was on the up,” says Chloe. “She was getting better, and her life was turning around.”

Bianca had also reconnected with many of her friends, including her ex-boyfriend Ward. Kim says they were inseparable, and Ward says he spoke to her almost every day. He had dated a few people since he and Bianca had split, he says, but “they weren’t anything special compared to her.” Right before she died, he was planning to tell her about his feelings, but instead, the last thing they ever talked about was Area 51 memes.

About a year before her daughter’s death, while Bianca was in the throes of her depression, Kim gave Bianca a card, which Kim found in her room after she died. On the card, Kim wrote, “If you can’t hang on for you, hang on for me. If that’s the only thing keeping you alive, let me be your reason to live, because I can’t live without you.” Bianca had promised to keep hanging on, to keep fighting. And it was starting to seem like she’d make it, like everything would be OK. “I fought for her for so many years, for so long,” Kim says. “And we finally were coming out the other end.”

“And then,” she says, “he took her from us.”

**I**N THE SPRING of 2019, Bianca met Brandon Clark on social media. A 21-year-old from the Syracuse area, a little less than an hour away from Utica, Clark was fond of fitness, gaming, and the anime series *Madoka Magica*. But he also had a violent and traumatic past: When he was 12, his father held his mother hostage at knifepoint for 10 hours because he believed she was cheating on him. The incident led to his father serving time in prison. According to Clark’s mother, after she was later arrested on unrelated charges, he was placed in foster care.

As a child, Clark was nerdy, polite, and solicitous to a fault, says Joe (not his real name), Clark’s childhood best friend. He was also obsessive, according to Joe, who asked to remain anonymous, fixating on *Pokémon* or whatever caught his eye. Still, he says Clark was a relatively normal kid and that the two were close, until he learned Clark had developed an obsession with lolicon – Japanese manga featuring young girls – and was texting with a 12-year-old girl when he was 16. According to screenshots shared with ROLLING STONE, Joe and his friends confronted Clark about it. “Trust me, you’re all better off not being concerned with the shit I do or think of doing, because you won’t like what you see,” Clark wrote back. Joe says he never spoke to Clark again.

Yet, when Kim met Clark, she found him charming and polite. He even opened up to Kim, telling her how he had spent his childhood pinballing through the foster-care system. So when Bianca told her mother that she was going with Clark to a Nicole Kidman concert at Trans-Pecos, a small venue in Queens, Kim saw no reason to say no, provided that Clark would drop Bianca off as soon as they got back to Utica. Bianca was thrilled. This was the first concert she’d been given permission to attend by herself.

By all accounts, Bianca had been extremely clear with Clark about the nature of their relationship. The one thing that struck her as slightly odd, Kim says, is that Clark occasionally referred to himself as Bianca’s boyfriend, which Bianca had told her he definitely was not. “She was 17 and getting ready to go to college,” Kim says. “She didn’t want a relationship.” Chloe, Bianca’s friend, says that she had complained about Clark’s creepy, obsessive messages. But no one saw this as particularly unusual. At the end of the day, Clark was just another orbiter, and it was far from uncommon within the community for orbiters to exhibit this type of persistent, boundary-crossing behavior. Such messages, says Chloe, are “very easy to ignore after you get so many of them.”

July 14th, 2019, was supposed to go like this: In the early-morning hours, Bianca was to arrive home, tiptoe through the living room, climb into bed in the tiny room she shared with her sister, and fall asleep next to the patches of pink clouds and anime-inspired artwork she’d painted on her wall.

Instead, here is how it went: At 6:03 a.m., a message was posted to Bianca’s server on Discord. “Sorry

fuckers, you're gonna have to find somebody else to orbit," the message read, along with a photo of a dark-haired young woman with winged eyeliner and a black tank top, her throat brutally cut, and her face splattered with blood. At first glance, it would be easy to mistake the image for a low-budget slasher production still, and indeed, many on the server initially assumed that was what it was. "I didn't have an immediate reaction – I thought it was literally gore," says Erica, Bianca's online friend, referring to gruesome images posted online for shock value. According to screengrabs from the chat, someone did a reverse image search and asked where the photo was from. "My fucking car. I fuck Bianca dumbass," the original poster responded, before telling followers to subscribe to the YouTuber PewDiePie – a meme also cited by the Christchurch mosque shooter.

Over the next few hours, Bianca's friends scrambled to figure out what was going on. Slowly, a portrait of the evening started to emerge: At the concert, Bianca and Clark had met up with a third person, a guy who went by the handle "Oipu" and was a long-time presence on the boards. He and Bianca had been part of the same online community, but friends believe this marked the first time they had met. In screengrabs of Discord DMs with a friend, she gushes about him that night in schoolgirlish terms: "he smells so nice lol," she wrote. "He's perfect... I'm in love." According to police, Bianca kissed Oipu while Clark went to get rolling papers. Clark had apparently witnessed the kiss, and no one had heard from Bianca since. In Discord screengrabs from that morning, Oipu says that Clark was "nasty and combative" and that Bianca had given him his first kiss.

At 7:21 a.m., an hour after Clark had posted the photo, calls began to pour into the Utica Police Department from all over the country, reporting that a "disturbing picture of a female that was named as Bianca Michelle Devins" had been posted to Discord, as Lt. Bryan Coromato, an amiable, stocky man in his early forties, later recounted. The department also received calls from family members of Clark, who had found a rambling missive akin to a suicide note at his aunt's home. Clark had also posted alarming images and messages on his Instagram story, including an image of a woman's bloody arm with the caption "I'm sorry Bianca," and changing his bio to show the current date as the day he died. Clark's mother tells ROLLING STONE that at some point during the night, he sent her a message on Facebook: "I'm so sorry mom. I love you."

At about 7:30 a.m., a 911 dispatcher received a call from Clark. He told her where he was located: Poe Street, a dead-end road about a mile from where Bianca had gone to high school. According to Coromato, Clark told the dispatcher he had committed a murder-suicide and that he was an organ donor, before saying, "I have to do the suicide part of the murder-suicide," and hanging up.

According to police, they arrived a few minutes later to find Clark lying on top of a green tarp, a small fire raging a few feet away, where he had destroyed his laptop and hard drive. He had spray-painted the words "May you never forget me" on the ground, and he was livestreaming to his Instagram followers. Clark then proceeded to cut his throat before taking a selfie, which he added to his Instagram story. "Ashes to ashes," the caption read. "I don't think he anticipated it hurting as much as it did," says investigator Peter Paladino. "He was rocking [back and forth], fighting through the pain." One of the officers asked where Bianca was. "Where the fuck do you think she

is?" Clark shouted, according to Coromato. It was at that point that an officer observed dark hair peeking out from beneath the tarp.

Clark survived his self-inflicted injuries. The next day, when doctors deemed him well enough to undergo questioning, Paladino visited him. Although police could not reveal the details of his statements due to his upcoming trial, Coromato says that "he was very interested in what was on television [about the case], let's put it that way."

Paladino speculates that Clark's alleged crime, combined with the evidence he had posted on Discord and Instagram, sent the only message he wanted to convey: That he was not, in the parlance of his community, just another one of Bianca's "beta orbiters," but that he was "someone who was in control, who couldn't be fucked with," Paladino says. He'd wanted something from her, and when she couldn't or wouldn't give it to him, he had to send her and the rest of the world a message, which Paladino summarized: "You can't do this to someone like me, because this is what will happen to you."

Social media only added to the horror. Because the photo of Bianca's body had been posted on Discord, #ripbianca started trending on Twitter within hours of her death. Bianca's murder immediately became something of a canvas onto which people could project their own agendas. Rumors spread that Bianca was asexual (false), that she had a mental illness (true), and that she was addicted to hard drugs (also false, according to her family and friends). Some used her killing as an opportunity to decry toxic masculinity and the misogyny of 4chan culture. Others reported that she'd been "decapitated" by an "incele omega orbiter." But Bianca was not decapitated, and Clark was not an incele in the conventional sense – Coromato says that information from both Bianca's and Clark's phones indicated they "undoubtedly had an intimate relationship."

As misinformation about Bianca's murder spread, so too did the photo that Clark had posted on Discord, which quickly made its way to Instagram. For days, it was impossible to search for Bianca's name or look at the hashtag #ripbianca without seeing it. At first, Instagram claimed that it was doing everything in its power to scrub the photos from the platform, telling ROLLING STONE that it had "taken steps to prevent others from reuploading the content." But Kim says the response was "inadequate. They're overstating what they did and how fast they had it taken down." In a statement, Instagram wrote, "All of us at Instagram were shocked and saddened by Bianca's tragic death.... We're continuing our work to prevent this from happening again, and are collaborating with a number of academic and research institutions to better detect harmful images and videos."

For weeks, people on the internet seemed to take sadistic pleasure in forcing members of Bianca's family to see the photo. Someone posted it as a comment underneath Kim's profile photo on Facebook. Another person AirDropped it to Rimmer while she was shopping for groceries. Someone from 4chan even sent it to Kim as a "cum tribute," a term for when someone ejaculates on a photo of a woman. He later gleefully posted his handiwork on an /r/9k/ thread.

Ward, Bianca's former boyfriend, still has nightmares about the photo. Sometimes he starts daydreaming and catches it being the last thing that pops into his head. He dated one girl after Bianca's death, a relationship that quickly ended. "I'd lay down and cuddle, and I'd be like, 'This don't feel right.' Because I know who I wanted to be next to me," he says.

In the media, many were quick to attribute Bianca's death to the perils of meeting strangers on the internet, a narrative Kim loathed. "Yes, Bianca and Brandon met on the internet, but it's 2019," she said. "That's just how people meet." But Bianca's online friends think there's more than a grain of truth to the idea that the internet killed Bianca, or at least, that the toxicity of her specific internet community helped contribute to her death. "I'd thought I was the worst thing to ever happen to her," says Rob, her ex from Long Island. "[But] after everything that happened with me, you'd think she'd learned her lesson on not to fucking trust people online."

For many girls in the community, particularly those who had seen the photo when it was originally posted, Bianca's murder was a terrifying wake-up call. They viewed Clark's obsessive behavior as an extension of the general toxicity of orbiters taken to its logical conclusion. "We all have met orbiters, we've all met guys that we met online, and we've all met creeps, absolute creeps, even guys who have threatened to kill us," says Erica. "I was thinking, 'This could have been me, this could have been any of us, but it was Bianca.'"

**I**n 2020, Brandon Clark will face trial on second-degree murder charges. (He has pleaded not guilty.) His public defender, Luke Nebush, who declined to comment on the trial to ROLLING STONE, could stage a defense of extreme emotional disturbance, Coromato speculates, predicated on the theory that Clark was driven mad by seeing Bianca kiss someone else. But according to authorities, there is ample evidence that Bianca's murder was premeditated. Police recovered knives, rope, and multiple other tools at the scene of her murder. "He had a plan," says Paladino. "And the only thing he wasn't able to accomplish was successfully taking his life."

Kim Devins and her family have showed up to every one of Clark's hearings, and have requested the maximum sentence for him – 25 years to life. They wear bright-pink T-shirts with a silhouette of a young girl on a swing, a reference to Bianca's favorite color and childhood activity. Kim hopes to catch his eye in court and force him to acknowledge the lives he ruined. "It is unfair that he got to live," she says.

In the months leading up to Clark's trial, Kim has spent much of her time trying to make sense of the one life event that doesn't make sense at all. She has started a scholarship in Bianca's name, which will provide funding for students studying psychology. The goal, she says, is to honor Bianca's dream of helping adolescents who struggle with mental illness.

Years before Bianca Devins' murder, she and her little sister, Liv, and her best friend, Gianna Murray, would make YouTube videos and post them online. At the time, Gianna says, Bianca hated being in front of the camera; for the most part, she was the one who filmed the other two. But Bianca does appear in one video, when she's about 11 years old. In it, she's on a playground, running up and down a hill, her legs scissor-kicking behind her. She heads straight toward an icy embankment and tumbles forward, shrieking with glee, her smile light-years long.

Watching that video, it's easy to imagine that girl all grown up, back home from college for the holidays, safe and warm in a crowded house, dyeing her hair in the sink, ignoring texts from unworthy boys, and playing Elvis Presley songs on the ukulele for her sister. It's easy to imagine that girl hurtling toward a happier future, and hard to imagine why anyone would have wanted to stop her. ☀



## → LINDSEY GRAHAM

[Cont. from 39] asked if he planned on taking his family somewhere warm. Franken said yes, in fact, they'd be vacationing in Puerto Rico. Without missing a beat, Graham said, "Do two fundraisers while you're there: one for the pro-statehood people and one for the anti-statehood people. They never talk to each other!"

"He was loaded for that," Franken says. "He jokes about being cynical with his colleagues – that's a big part of his humor – but I think that actually reflects a reality. He does what he has to do."

**I**N OCTOBER, Graham's re-election campaign announced he'd broken fundraising records for the third quarter of 2019 with a staggering \$3.3 million haul, more than any other Republican Senate candidate raised during the same period and the most any candidate in South Carolina had ever raised in a three-month period (\$1.2 million came from small donors, who in GOP fundraising circles tend to be Trump supporters, and 87 percent of the money came from out of state).

His likely general-election opponent next year, Jaime Harrison, is a charismatic former chair of the South Carolina Democratic Party. I met Harrison as he was making a campaign appearance in Rock Hill, handing out meals at a mobile food bank. Graham, Harrison tells me, "has not had a town hall in South Carolina in well over two years. But you can find him on Fox News or golfing with the president every other day. That's not helping the people here." Pointing to a Graham quote about wanting to be "relevant," Harrison says, "Relevance for him is that news reporters gaggle around him when he's walking down the corridors; it's going on *Sean Hannity* or flying on Air Force One. Relevance for the people of South Carolina is none of that."

Most of the local political observers I spoke with expressed skepticism that Harrison, who is black, can replicate the base-energizing strategy of Stacey Abrams in Georgia and come as close to winning in a state as conservative as South Carolina. Still, Harrison has broken fundraising records for any Democratic Senate candidate in the state, raising \$2.2 million in the third quarter. Their race will likely be the most expensive Senate campaign in state history.

Gibbs Knotts, a professor of political science at the College of Charleston, considers Harrison a long shot, but adds, "What I would say is, look at South Carolina's 1st District. Trump won that by 13 percentage points, and then you had a guy like Joe Cunningham," the Democrat who won an upset victory for a vacant House seat in 2018. "A lot of folks in South Carolina look at Cunningham and wonder, 'Is that the magic formula?'" Knotts went on. "It's an upscale Charleston suburb. If there's a Democratic candidate who can do well in those kinds of suburbs, along with urban areas and rural parts of the state that are heavily African American, that's a coalition that could work against Lindsey Graham."

But probably not next year. It's ironic that Graham has adopted Trump's strategy of appealing to the base and only the base, and it will likely ensure that the onetime highly endangered RINO will coast to re-election, whereas the same strategy could doom the deeply unpopular Trump nationwide. Meanwhile, impeachment looms, with the action turning to the Senate. During an impeachment trial, senators, acting as jurors, must sit in silence as House managers

and the president's lawyers argue the case. But Graham, as one of Trump's most tireless apologists, will certainly play a role on the defense team, spinning for gaggles of reporters inside the Senate and running interference with his own Judiciary investigation into the Bidens. "After McCain's passing, I got the sense that Graham was isolated within his own caucus, and that having allies at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue behooved him," the Democratic Senate staffer says. Now Graham has emerged, unlikely as it would have seemed just a few years ago, as one of the most powerful voices in his party.

"People try to analyze Lindsey through the prism of the manifest inconsistencies that exist between things that he used to believe and what he's doing now," Schmidt says. "The way to understand him is to look at what's consistent. And essentially what he is in American politics is what, in the aquatic world, would be a pilot fish: a smaller fish that hovers about a larger predator, like a shark, living off of its detritus. That's Lindsey. And when he swam around the McCain shark, broadly viewed as a virtuous and good shark, Lindsey took on the patina of virtue. But wherever the apex shark is, you find the Lindsey fish hovering about, and Trump's the newest shark in the sea. Lindsey has a real draw to power – but he's found it unattainable on his own merits."

Speaking to CBS' John Dickerson after McCain's death, Graham recalled one of the final afternoons he spent with his friend at his Arizona ranch. They watched *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, a classic Western in which Jimmy Stewart plays a U.S. senator who is elected after he's given credit for gunning down the titular villain – though in fact (spoiler!) John Wayne's character actually did it. The movie is where the line "When legend becomes fact, print the legend" comes from. When Dickerson pushed Graham about his cozying up to McCain's nemesis in the White House, Graham attempted to burnish his own legend, making his willingness to bend the knee sound patriotic. "I don't have the luxury of playing like he's not president," he said. "I'm not going to give up on the idea of working with this president."

It sounded good, but which, exactly, of the urgent issues of the day was Trump "working with" the senior senator from South Carolina on? Not immigration, nor climate change. (The old Graham fought hard with John Kerry and Joe Lieberman to try to pass a bipartisan cap-and-trade bill.) And certainly few of Trump's actions in the realm of foreign policy – most recently, Trump's betrayal of the Kurds in Syria – would have reassured the hawkish neocon. Wasn't it actually more of a luxury to "work" with the president, which in effect means kowtowing to the president, and still remain in your cozy position in the Senate, rather than risk being the character in the movie who takes a shot at the bad guy and misses?

When I ask Woodard what motivates Graham to stay in politics after all these years, he says, "I've thought about that," and pauses before continuing. "He's alone. It's not like he has a family, a child. His time, when he's away from the spotlight, I think is a lonely time. He's more comfortable in the spotlight where he's Senator Lindsey Graham, talking about things he knows a lot about. I thought he wouldn't run in 2020. And then he did the Kavanaugh thing, and he's the Trump buddy. If Trump wins a second term, he might wind up in the Cabinet, maybe Secretary of Defense? The South, and South Carolina in particular, has a history of sending 'em back. He's got Thurmond's seat, and Thurmond had that seat until he was 100. So he could have a long way to go." ☀

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## → ELIZABETH WARREN

[Cont. from 47] responsible for the election of other women and of good, strong, progressive men. Sure enough, one of the first things that happens in the Nevada Legislature is gun-violence legislation passes. Real change. The wave of 2018 is about a changing democratic landscape. 2019 has given us the first stirrings of that. So the battle now becomes: Is America a democracy that is going to be run by the billionaires and the people who suck up to the billionaires, or are we going to be a democracy built on a grassroots movement, on people who engage and say my personal life is at stake here?

### But is there anything you can do to address that underlying dynamic?

I do it every day. I go out and meet people every single day, and shake hands, and talk to people about the things that touch their lives. [I've met] more than one couple in the selfie line, where she says, "I dragged him here," and then he says, "But I'm all in now." I'll take that.

### Before you kicked off your presidential campaign, you released a video about your family background that seemed like it was intended to answer Trump's taunts — you took him up on his challenge to take a DNA test. Did the reaction to the video change the way you think about how you would respond to those kinds of attacks from him in a general election?

I've learned a lot. I'm grateful for many conversations that people have had with me. Running for president has been about recognizing where I've made mistakes and have regrets, and also about how to listen and build the bridges that we're all gonna need if we are able to create a strong enough movement to repair our democracy and take back our country.

### But did it change the way you would respond to him specifically?

Donald Trump has a strategy of turning people against people. He thinks so long as people are arguing against each other that no one will notice that he and his corrupt buddies are stealing both the wealth and dignity of this country. He's wrong, and 2020 is our chance to prove it.

### There is a perception that you made a tactical error on Medicare for All — that this wasn't your signature issue, but you were under pressure to provide details on how you would pay for it. Do you think you made a mistake?

I've spent most of my adult life working on the question of why people go broke. Health care, housing, child care, and sending a kid off to school have created huge pressures on middle-class families. Combine that with largely flat incomes, and it's pretty easy to see how tens of millions of people across this country are deep in debt and living just one financial bump away from collapse. It's important to me to talk about all of those issues, and that's what I've done. Not just since I've started running for president, but throughout my career. One of the exciting parts of running for president is I get to talk about not just what's broken, but what we could do to fix it.

### What do you think is the single biggest challenge facing the country right now?

That our government works better and better and better for a smaller and smaller group at the top and is leaving everyone else behind. That is shrinking opportunity for tens of millions of people and ultimately undermines our democracy and our entire future.

### If you could implement only one of your plans, which one would it be?

I'd be anti-corruption, because then everything else would change.

### Is there a specific piece—

All of them, because that's the thing with corruption: Money doesn't make itself felt in Washington in just one way. It's in hundreds of ways, and thousands of ways. It's the obvious — around lobbying and the revolving door with Wall Street and with the defense industry — but it is also in very subtle ways. The United States Supreme Court has no rules of ethics, so justices can take freebie vacations with groups that will repeatedly appear in front of those same justices to argue cases. That is thinly disguised influence-peddling. Think of it like water that's flowing everywhere. It's not like you can say, "Oh, there's one, and if you stop it here you'll stop the whole thing."

### One of the things you often say on the campaign trail is that Democrats and Republicans used to work together on climate action—

Yes!

### But then there was so much money spent on misinformation — you mention the Koch brothers specifically. What would it take to unwind or undo some of that misinformation that's already spread so far?

Part of it is for our leaders to show how they understand the urgency of the moment. The platform of the presidency is enormous. When a president says this issue is not very important — and a president can say that either overtly or just by not talking about it — then there's plenty of room for other conversations to flourish. When a president shows real leadership — here's what's happening, here's what the scientists say, here are the investments we need to make to protect our future — that is a path toward changing an entire national conversation. It's not all of it. It's why I talk all the time about the two parts. We need a leader, but we also need a movement on the ground to make real change.

### Do you have any reason to believe that an impeachment vote right now wouldn't go down on party lines?

I don't know. I know that every single person in the United States Senate took the same oath of office to uphold the Constitution of the United States, not to support a party or even an individual president. I have to believe that oath weighs heavily on Republicans who are under great pressure to support a president who has been caught trying to squeeze a foreign leader for favors that don't benefit the United States, but benefit only himself personally.

### What do you think it's going to take to break down that cynicism and loyalty that Republican elected officials, and also Republican voters, have for Trump?

I think that it's going to happen in pieces. It will start right now in the run-up to the 2020 election. It's important to reframe the conversation away from Trump. Donald Trump wants everything to be about him. The 2020 election is partly about Donald Trump, but only partly. It's about things that have been broken in this country for decades. Donald Trump is just the latest and most aggressive symptom. It's about talking about what's broken and showing the people we can fix it. It's about optimism that the vote counts. That we can make something happen.

And then the second part is to start delivering on that promise. And when we do, that's when the world

really starts to change. When I get to sign the bill that cancels student-loan debt for 43 million Americans, the whole world takes a click in a different direction. Millions of young people, Democrats and Republicans, who have only seen the government as on the other side — as a debt collector — suddenly it's a government that's on their side. I think the student-loan debt forgiveness will be a pivotal moment in reframing the tension in this country away from the tired old left-right, and toward the fundamental question of who this democracy works for.

### I'm interested in what you do to unwind.

I walk, and I listen to fiction.

### What are you listening to right now?

The John Rain series — it's a good sort of mystery adventure.

### Do you count your steps?

I count miles.

### How many miles do you usually do?

I've averaged 6.6 miles every single day [this year] — some days I get way above that, and some days I fall short because the rest of the team keeps me working on too many other things. And I don't get to count my steps when I'm doing town halls.

### I know you love a Michelob Ultra. Do you have any other vices?

Television.

### What are you watching right now?

Bruce and I love an hour of good TV. We finished *Line of Duty* — it's a British mystery that's really good.

### Is there a book that you've returned to multiple times over the course of your life, that's really special to you?

*Sense and Sensibility*. I reread it about a month ago.

### What do you like about it?

It's about both the mind and the heart.

### I've read that you get dressed in four minutes. Are there other things you do to cut down on decision fatigue?

I wear my hair the same way all the time. I buy the same kind of shoes, I buy the same pants, and the same tops, a narrow range of sweaters, and a narrow range of jackets.

### What's the best advice you've ever gotten?

Ask yourself what's the worst that could happen, and if nobody will get physically injured, then give it a try.

### What's one piece of financial advice that you think everyone should know?

Debt is really dangerous — far more dangerous than you think.

### Is there anything you wish more people understood about you?

That everything I do — good, bad, and indifferent — comes from the fact that I care. All of it.

### Last question: You named your golden retriever after George Bailey, Jimmy Stewart's character in *It's a Wonderful Life*. So I have to ask: Bailey's Building and Loan, good bank or bad bank?

Good bank. I haven't watched the movie in years—

### I think there are those who would argue it's a subprime mortgage lender—

Actually, I disagree with that. He wasn't trying to extract value out of those folks. He just used a different method for determining who was creditworthy. In fact, I'm surprised that you asked that question. He didn't try to do accelerated mortgages that were going to cost people their homes or suck thousands of dollars of value out of every transaction. They were trying to help people build some wealth! It's why we named our dog Bailey. And Bailey is a very good boy. ☺

# Steven Van Zandt

*The E Street Band guitarist on making the jump to acting and life with Bruce*

## What are the best and worst parts of success?

The best part of success, real success, is getting a chance to work the way you want to work, do what you want to do. Your projects are funded, your ideas are funded, your content is marketed. The worst part of success is being more famous than you are rich. I know that sounds

Van Zandt recently reissued six early solo albums in a deluxe vinyl box set.

funny, but I'm involved in fundraisers all the time, and I have to ask people for money, which I hate doing more than anything else on the planet. And they look at you like, "What are you asking me for money for? I've seen you on TV. You must be fucking rich."

You'd never acted before you took the role of Silvio on *The Sopranos*. How did you find the courage to go in there and work with these top pros?

I wrote a bio of who the guy was, and I made up my own story. He grew up with Tony Soprano; he was his best friend. He's the only guy who doesn't want to be the boss, so he's the only guy Tony trusts. I kind of used my relationship with Bruce [Springsteen], basically. And part of my biography for Silvio was that he was fearless, so when I walked out on the set, I was that guy. Steve Van Zandt could not have walked onto that stage, believe me, but Silvio could.

You've been with your wife, Maureen, for 37 years.

## What's the secret to a long marriage?

If you want to stay married, stay apart. We've been married for 37 years, but we've been together for about 10 of those. Truthfully, though, I think it's important to give each other some space. She has a very, very strong personality. She has her own life, her own interests, her own career. I think you need to have enough in common, obviously, to stay together and stay in love, which we have, but at the same time, you want to be able to give each other a little room to grow on your own and be your own person.

People often say that rock is dying. Do you think the genre will wind up like jazz, where it's enjoyed by only a small cult of devotees?

We'll be lucky to end up as a cult, OK? If you would've told me [my Sirius station would] be the only one that ended up playing the Beatles, I would have said, "You've got to be kidding me." I thought that was carved in stone.

You and Bruce Springsteen have been close friends since you were teenagers. How have you managed to not let

## business and creative issues get in the way of that relationship?

Our friendship is deeper than any of that, and it's forever. I decided that very early on. Remember, he was a very different person the first 10 years I knew him. He wasn't the world's greatest entertainer. He was like one of those grunge guys with long hair that just stares at his shoes. But I got extraordinary strength from finding one other person on the planet that felt the same way I did about rock & roll. You only need one so you don't think you're insane and you don't think you're a loser by not fitting into society.

And I didn't fit in and he didn't fit in, and so we kind of had each other there in the beginning.

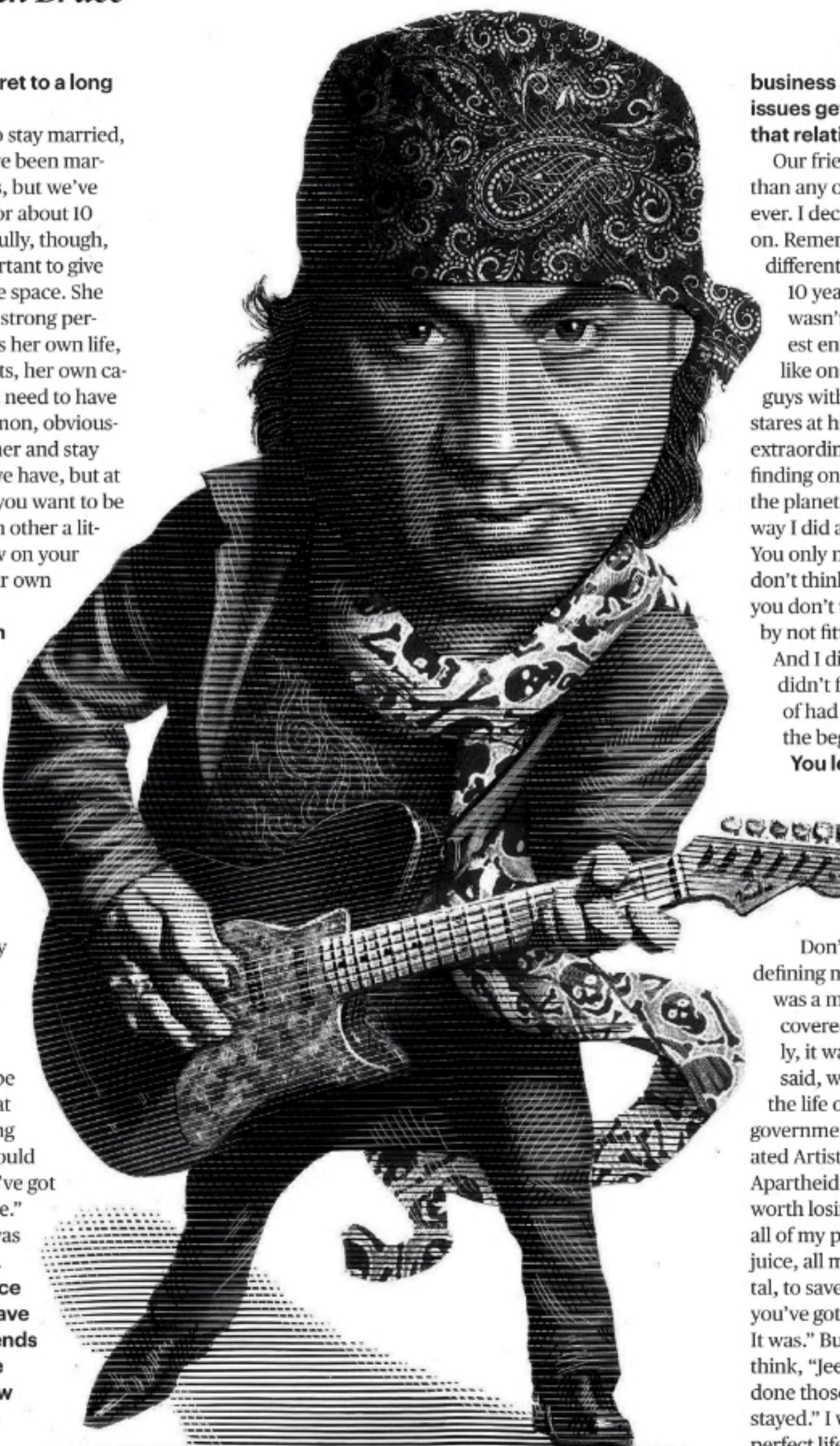
You left the E Street

Band in 1984.

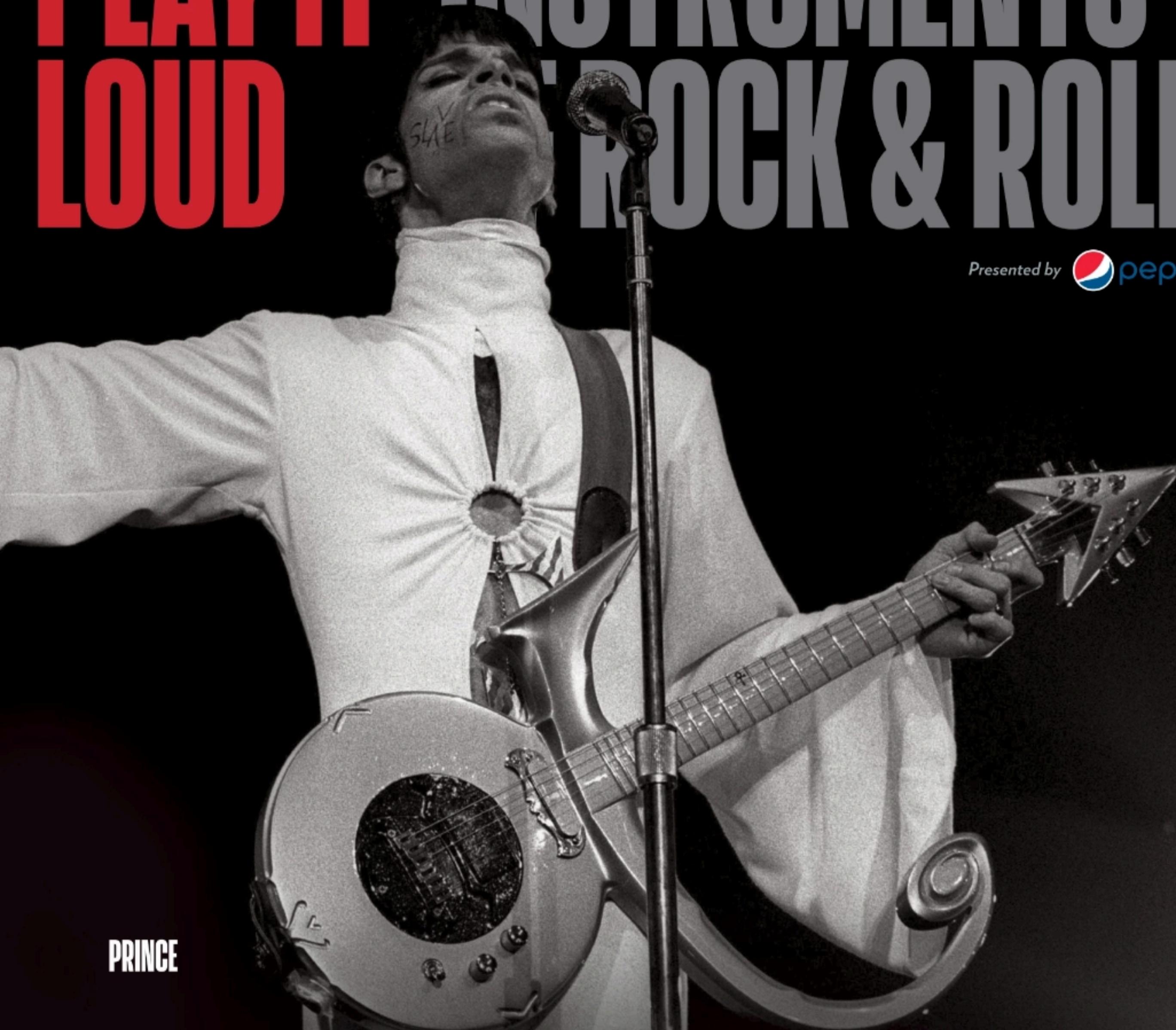
What advice would you give yourself the day before?

Don't do it! It's the one defining moment of my life. It was a mistake I've never recovered from. Financially, it was apocalyptic. That said, we did take years off the life of the South African government [Van Zandt created Artists United Against Apartheid in 1985]. But is that worth losing all of my friends, all of my power base, all my juice, all my celebrity capital, to save a few lives? And you've got to say, "Yeah, sure. It was." But I look back and think, "Jeez, if only I could've done those things and stayed." I would've had the perfect life.

ANDY GREENE



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